

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES*Thursday, October 10, 2024*

The House met at 1.30 p.m.

PRAYERS[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]**APPROPRIATION (FINANCIAL YEAR 2025) BILL, 2024**

[Sixth Day]

Order for resuming adjourned debate on question [October 04, 2024].

That the Bill be now read a second time

Question again proposed.

Madam Speaker: Those who have already contributed to the debate: hon. Colm Imbert, MP, Minister of Finance; Mrs. Kamla Persad-Bissessar SC, MP, Leader of the Opposition, Member for Siparia; hon. Stuart Young SC, MP, Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West; Mr. David Lee, MP, Member for Pointe-a-Pierre; hon. Mr. Keith Scotland SC, MP, Minister in the Ministry of National Security, Member for Port of Spain South; Mr. Dinesh Rambally, MP, Member for Chaguanas West; Sen. The Hon. Donna Cox, Minister of Social Development and Family Services; Ms. Vandana Mohit, MP, Member of Chaguanas East; hon. Ayana Webster-Roy, MP, Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister, Member for Tobago East; Sen. The Hon. Paula Gopee-Scoon, Minister of Trade and Industry; Mr. Rushton Paray, MP, Member for Mayaro; hon. Brian Manning, MP, Minister in the Ministry of Finance, Member for San Fernando East; Mr. Davendranath Tancoo, MP, Member for Oropouche West; hon. Marvin Gonzales, MP, Minister of Public Utilities, Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West; Mr. Barry Padarath, MP, Member for Princes Town; hon.

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Shamfa Cudjoe-Lewis, MP, Minister of Sport and Community Development, Member for Tobago West; Mr. Arnold Ram, MP, Member for Caroni Central; hon. Lisa Morris-Julien, MP, Minister in the Ministry of Education, Member for D'Abadie O'Meara; Dr. Rishad Seecheran, MP, Member for Caroni East; Mr. Kennedy Richards, MP, Member for Point Fortin; Ms. Michelle Benjamin, MP, Member for Moruga/Tableland; hon. Faris Al-Rawi SC, MP, Minister of Rural Development and Local Government, Member for San Fernando West; Ms. Khadijah Ameen, MP, Member for St. Augustine; hon. Penelope Beckles, MP, Minister of Planning and Development, Member for Arima; Mr. Rodney Charles, MP, Member for Naparima; hon. Adrian Leonce, MP, Minister in the Ministry of Housing and Development, Member for Laventille East/Morvant; Dr. Roodal Moonilal, MP, Member for Oropouche East; hon. Fitzgerald Hinds, MP, Minister of National Security, Member for Laventille West; Mr. Saddam Hosein, MP, Member for Barataria/San Juan; Sen. The Hon. Dr. Amery Browne, Minister of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs; Dr. Rai Ragbir, Member for Cumuto/Manzanilla; Sen the Hon. Hassel Bacchus, Minister of Digital Transformation; hon. Foster Cummings, MP, Minister of Youth Development and National Service, Member for La Horquetta/Talparo; hon. Terrence Deyalsingh, MP, Minister of Health, Member for St. Joseph; Mr. Roger Monroe, MP, Member for Toco/Sangre Grande; Mrs. Anita Haynes-Alleyne, MP, Member for Tabaquite; hon. Dr. Nyan Gadsby-Dolly, MP, Minister of Education, Member for St. Ann's East; hon. Stephen Mc Clashie, MP, Minister of Labour, Member for La Brea; Mr. Rudranath Indarsingh, MP, Member for Couva South; Sen. The Hon. Rohan Sinanan, Minister of Works and Transport; hon. Symon de Nobriga, MP, Minister in the Office of the Prime

Appropriation (Financial Year 2025)
 Bill, 2024
 Madam Speaker (cont'd)

2024.10.10

Minister, Member for Diego Martin Central; Mr. Esmond Forde, MP, Deputy Speaker, Member for Tunapuna.

The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (Sen. The Hon. Kazim Hosein): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker, it is my distinct pleasure to be in this honourable House today being the last day. Madam Speaker, I want to begin by specially acknowledging my colleague, the Minister of Finance—

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein:—you are most welcome, Sir—for serving this country and serving as a Minister of Finance over the last nine years, going into the tenth year.

Mr. S. Hosein: This is his last year.

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: And we will be back for the next five years.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: I was just responding to the Member for Barataria/San Juan. I want to also say a special thank you, to my colleague Minister Penelope Beckles for her role—

Madam Speaker: Minister, in this House we refer to Members, either by their portfolio or their constituency, so that when you refer to a Member here, it is either Minister of whatever portfolio, or by Member for whatever constituency.

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: Thank you very much for your guidance, Madam Speaker, and I should have known better, because I have been listening to this debate and you were correcting a lot of Members.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: Thank you very much for your guidance again. So, I would like to thank the Member for Arima, in her portfolio as Minister of Planning and Development, for guiding the Minister of Agriculture through these years. I have been there, two years and some months now, and I want to thank her, for her guidance and the Ministry of Planning and Development.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: Madam Speaker, I want to make a special mention to my colleague, who has been in the Ministry longer than me, nine years going into 10, and that is a young farmer and a young professional, Minister Avinash Singh.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: We have worked together in the interest of the farmers, the livestock, the fishermen. We have worked together in the interest of all the people in the agri industry. Madam Speaker, when I look at where I am standing right now, and I look at the front bench and the back bench, and according to my colleague, the Member for Toco/Sangre Grande, when he said yesterday—I listened to him yesterday attentively. We on this side have one leader, one party.

And I want to say to my leader, thank him for giving me the opportunity to serve as the first citizen of the City of San Fernando, one, thank him also for giving me the opportunity to serve as the Minister of Rural Development and Local Government, and being in this portfolio now, as the first citizen serving the country. And I want to thank him sincerely, and I am looking forward to working for the rest of the year. I do not want anybody to get too comfortable, we will be back for the following year.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: I stand before this honourable House, Madam Speaker, to inform the citizens of this beloved country, to report on the achievements, not only in the last year, but over the last five years. These investments have strengthened our agricultural sector, enhancing food security, boosting local production and solidifying our position as a leader in the regional agricultural sector.

1.40 p.m.

Madam Speaker, I just want to dive into the achievements for fiscal 2024. Madam Speaker, our allocation under the Consolidated Fund and the Infrastructure Development Fund in fiscal 2024 was \$951,573,400. It was utilized to enhance several strategic areas, including, one, improving infrastructure, particularly in agricultural access roads; improving water management systems in major food basket areas; improving service delivery; institutional strengthening; improving access to grants and incentives; improving land tenure; increased focus on youth and agriculture; encouraging the adoption of climate-smart technology and innovation to drive agricultural production; and improving on activities oriented towards enhanced food security and reducing the food import bill.

Madam Speaker, I take this opportunity to highlight some of the projects and programmes and achievements of the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries for fiscal 2024. I turn to the food security crisis. Madam Speaker, food and nutrition security remains a critical concern for Trinidad and Tobago, as global challenges, such as food prices rising, climate change and disruptions in supply chains continue to impact the availability and affordability of essential goods.

In 2024, the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries prioritized initiatives aimed at boosting local food production, reducing the nation's

dependence on food imports, destabilizing prices for consumers through strategic investments in land distribution, agricultural infrastructure and targeted support for farmers. The Ministry has laid the foundation for a resilient food system, and meets the need of both the domestic population and broader CARICOM region. Moving forward, our efforts in 2025 will continue to focus on enhancing productivity, modernizing agricultural practices and addressing the underlying drivers of food security.

Access to finance and credit: Madam Speaker, the provision of capital to farmers and fisherfolk has remained a critical policy position of this PNM Administration. The Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries continues to develop finance and credit through the Agricultural Development Bank to increase assets for farmers and improve their financial status. In fiscal 2023 to 2024, as of August, the ADB has funded 688 loans—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein:—valued at \$89,590,268 in total.

The ADB continues to support sectoral development through funding to different areas along the food value chain, from agricultural services, \$36.6 million, to food crops, \$22.4 million; agro-processing, \$19.3 million; fishing industry, \$7.4 million; and livestock, with \$4.4 million in disbursements. Additionally, the ADB has funded 87 young people with loans, from the ages of 18 to 35 years—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein:—at a value of \$18,398,000 over the last fiscal year.

Food Security and Food Prices Committee: Madam Speaker, this has been a cry throughout the years and the Cabinet took a decision to ensure that we formed a

Food Security and Food Prices Committee, established in 2024, and brought together key stakeholders across various sectors to address the issues of rising food prices and to ensure that nutritious food remains accessible to all citizens. The committee comprises of 13 members, experts in agriculture, economics, trade and consumer advocacy, and has already been analyzing the root cause of price fluctuations and identifying actionable solutions.

The result of their ongoing work will be critical in guiding future policy inventions with the agricultural sector. Their findings will help us shape targeted strategies to stabilize food prices, increase local production and reduce our dependency on imports, ensuring that we respond effectively to both domestic challenges and global market pressures. These policy adjustments will include: To support farmers, protect consumers, and strengthen Trinidad and Tobago's overall food security. Madam Speaker, this is just one of the many ways in which we have been leading progressive conversations with key agriculture partners to ensure food security becomes a reality.

We have the Agricultural Finance Support Programme, which is the Agro-Incentive Grant. Madam Speaker, the Agricultural Finance Support Programme, or the Agro-Incentive Grant, as we call it, stands as a testament to this Administration's unwavering commitment to employing farmers and promoting sustainable agricultural practices. Since its inception in 2019, the Ministry has disbursed more than \$27 million to over 300 small and medium-sized farmers.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: The strategic financial support has played a pivotal role in driving increased local food production, directly contributing to our national food security goals. During this fiscal year 2024, we executed three of these

distributions, assisting over 100 farmers, with a combined value of over \$11 million.

Furthermore, just within the last week, we received an additional 116 cheques, valued at \$11 million, for distribution, and preparations are currently underway for large distribution again. Madam Speaker, this Administration continues to demonstrate that it is not just about talking about supporting farmers, we have deliberate and meaningful action that is taking place.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: We understand that the backbone of our agricultural sector lies within the farmers. Through this grant, we ensure that they have access to necessary resources through new technology, modern-day practices and that they are skilled in their operations. Our focus is clear, we are building an agricultural sector that is resilient, productive and sustainable.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: We have also, Madam Speaker, the Agricultural Incentive Programme, which is called the AIP. At the Ministry, we provide a suite of 92 incentives through the Agricultural Incentive Programme, fisheries incentive programme and forestry incentive programme to support development at various sectors.

For the period 2017 to 2024, a total of \$146,462,751 was extended into support of this sector alone. Madam Speaker, in 2024, payments under this Agricultural Incentive Programme amounted to \$13,191,761.64, and were made to 2,287 persons. Under the fisheries incentive programme, a total of \$229,589.22 was distributed to 69 persons. In fiscal 2024, the forestry incentive programme had only one grant recipient who received a total of \$2,500.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

1.50 p.m.

So you see, Madam Speaker, our activities are focused on supporting the greatest asset, the farmers and the fisherfolk. Every grant, incentive and service we offer is designed to empower tools and resources, they need to thrive and we are confident that this will redound exponentially to the benefit of our country.

Tax-free agriculture exemption: I want to especially thank, on behalf of all the farmers, the fisherfolk—this tax-free agriculture tax exemption. I want to personally thank the Minister of Finance and the Member for Diego Martin North/East. Thank you Sir, on behalf of all these fishermen and farmers. This is a very important initiative. I also know that the Member for La Horquetta /Talparo always speaks about “tax-free” for farmers and the youth in agriculture. Finally, it is coming to pass and by the end of this year and early January, we will have tax-free agriculture and that needs, according to the Deputy Speaker, Member for Tunapuna, “ah little thump on de desk.”

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: Markets and marketing: Madam Speaker, through the National Agricultural Marketing and Development Corporation, which is called NAMDEVCO, the Ministry is able to provide critical marketing services to its stakeholders along the food value chain, inclusive of marketing infrastructure and to support productive and marketing strategies. At present, NAMDEVCO oversees nine farmers’ markets: Macoya, Couva, Diego Martin, Chaguanas, Point Fortin, Queen’s Park Savannah, La Horquetta, San Fernando and Arima. With four wholesale markets: The Norris Deonarine Northern Wholesale Market in Macoya, the Southern Wholesale Market in Debe, the Orange Valley Wholesale

Fish Market. We also have three packing houses, one in Piarco, one in Brechin Castle and the other in Couva. In April of this year, the Arima Farmers' Market was successfully relocated following the proactiveness of the Ministry and by extension, the Government, all for the benefit of our farmers.

As we continue along digitization, Madam Speaker, the online market has seen growth in the last year and currently has 127 buyers and 378 registered sellers. In the upcoming fiscal, NAMDEVCO has done remarkably well. NAMDEVCO has been a real secret to a lot of people. By the time the market opens at 6 o'clock, by the time it is 7/7.30; 8.00 o'clock, most of the time, the market has been sold out. That tells the amount of people that visit all these markets.

Madam Speaker, I mean I was in local government most of my life and when I went into the Ministry of Agriculture, Lands and Fisheries—I think it was a blessing that I went there. I began to value my body more, and eat fruits and vegetables because the inside of our body is not made of PVC pipes and cast iron, and so on, so we have to be careful of what we eat. We have to eat fruits, vegetables, and especially fresh fruits and vegetables. Everybody sitting in this House here, everybody who is listening to me, wants to live long.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: The only way we can live long—if you follow the Member for St. Joseph and myself, you will live long.

Infrastructural development for agricultural sustainability: Madam Speaker, as we shift our focus to infrastructure development for agricultural sustainability, we recognize that robust infrastructure is the backbone of a resilient agricultural sector. This includes investment in irrigation systems, rural roads and market

access, all aimed at enhancing productivity, reducing post-harvest losses and ensuring that our farmers thrive in an increasingly competitive landscape. By fostering sustainable infrastructure, we not only support our agricultural community, but secure food security for generations, and generations to come.

Road and water management: In fiscal 2023 to 2024, approximately 22 access roads across the length and breadth of the agricultural communities were completed—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein:—at a cost of over \$19 million, and I said across Trinidad and Tobago. These roads include Silk Cotton Trace, Mendoza Trace, Mathura Road, Upper Rio Grande, Monte Video Road, and I could go on. I could go on, and on.

Mr. Richards: What about Point? You did plenty in Point.

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: Point Fortin, all over, all over; Mendoza Trace, Edward Gibbons Trace, and so on. We did a lot of infrastructural work and we intend to continue with this work with this present—in the next fiscal.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: A total of 36.2 kilometres of channels were completed in the last fiscal at a total cost of \$1,060,227.63. These channels included Caroni: the Caroni Project, Bernard Road and Jerningham project; St. George East: La Compensation and Bon Air Food Crop Project; St. Andrew/St. David: the Mora Allotment Food Crop Project; Victoria: Massey Lands Project and Moruga Food Crop Project; St. Patrick East: Oropouche state lands, Rahamut Trace, Puzzle Island; Nariva/Mayaro: Cushe food crop project, North Boundary Trace. Madam Speaker, desilting works in Plum Mitan were also undertaken during the last fiscal,

as we constructed the Caltoo Trace following pleas from the farming community and the Member for Cumuto/Manzanilla.

As part of the Ministry's water management projects, there are three critical projects that have commenced and will continue into the new fiscal, namely, the replacement of the sluice gate at the south-western end of the Orange Grove Project and supply and installation of the floodgate and trash rack; phase two: Depot Road and cleaning and desilting of the retention pond; phase one: supply and installation of new irrigation pumps at La Compensation. In fiscal 2025, the Ministry will continue in its effort to rehabilitate and construct agricultural access roads for targeted communities and strategic crops as well as desilt water channels to allow farmers ease to access both goods and services.

Madam Speaker, I turn to the Fishery's Division. Under the Ministry's *Development Programme*, the enhancement of fishing infrastructure is targeted in five communities for fiscal 2025, Blanchisseuse, Bonasse, Carli Bay, La Fillette and Las Cuevas. Approximately 314 registered fishermen derive their livelihoods from these areas. Over the period 2019 to 2024, the expenditure on fishing facilities totalled \$2,629,231. In fiscal 2023, a total of just over \$1.2 million was expended on the upgrade of the fishing facilities in Erin and Maracas, where an estimated 156 fisherfolk would have benefit from the improved facilities. In fiscal 2024 to 2025, under the development programme, two fishing facilities have been prioritized, namely Blanchisseuse Fishing Facility and La Fillette Fishing Facility.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: It is estimated that 166 fisherfolk would benefit from these improved facilities. Madam Speaker, I would like to inform Members here and those who are listening, I do not just say that these things are happening and

they happen overnight. I go myself because I am a hands-on person. I am an on-the-ground person. I go to visit each community to ensure that they get what they want, once we can help them. Because they are feeding the nation, whether it is in fishing or with planting. We go to—

Ms. Ameen: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: No, I will be there. If I “ain’t” come down, I will be there. Do not worry.

Ms. Ameen: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: Do not worry.

2.00 p.m.

Madam Speaker: So let us contain the crosstalk. Minister please do not be distracted. Direct your comments to this was, please.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: Thank you, Madam Speaker, for your guidance. The Palo Seco Agricultural Enterprise Limited. Madam Speaker, for fiscal 2023 to 2024 the Palo Seco Agricultural Enterprises Limited awarded 19 infrastructural projects in the sum of \$40 million.

Hon. Member: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: Madam Speaker, \$121,882.92 of which four were completed, six are close to completion and the remaining are ongoing. This agency is crucial to infrastructural development across the agriculture communities and we will continue to engage with farmers across the nation.

Madam Speaker, as I move on, I want to acknowledge that the agricultural sector is riddled with risk that can negatively affect production levels and could lead to significant losses. Farmers do not have the luxury of guaranteed levels of

output, therefore, the Ministry recognizes the necessity to mitigate risk and buffer the farming community throughout the implementation of several core programmes aimed at these potential losses. One, Disaster Assistance/Flood Control Programme; Pests and Disease Management Programme, Praedial Larceny Squad; forest regeneration; forest protection and wildlife management.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: Disaster Assistance/Flood Control Programme. Madam Speaker, the Ministry utilizes a Disaster Assistance Model to assist farmers and fisherfolk to restart their lives in the shortest possible time after a natural disaster. Over the last five years, Trinidad and Tobago's agricultural sector has been impacted by weather-related hazards such as strong winds, floods and drought-like conditions as well as geological and environmental hazards such as earthquakes, sea level rises, increased ocean acidification and storm surges. The average payment made under the Ministry's Disaster Assistance Programme for 2017 to 2024 was \$45,590,197. In fiscal 2024, payment in compensation to 34 farmers was approximately \$637, 352.70. These reductions, Madam Speaker, are a direct result of the Ministry's desilting programme, coupled with favourable conditions.

Pests and diseases. The impact of pests and diseases on agriculture production continues to be a challenge for farmers. Integrated pests and disease, management interventions, are critical in the potential of the spread of diseases reducing losses by farmers. Our research divisions of the Ministry has championed integrated pest management, initiated to address specifically the Moruga Grasshopper, an economic pest that attacks vegetables, food and fruits. Madam Speaker, the following are some of proactive measures that have been undertaken.

One, participating in meetings with the Inter-American Coordinating Group in Plant Protection for guidance on management and discussions are ongoing with the Moruga Grasshopper Committee as well as laboratory testing on the efficiency of pesticides. Efficiency trials of bio-pesticides against adult and first-stage grasshopper. The trial yielded positive results of 100 per cent mortality after the eight-day period under laboratory conditions and five days in the field. More work on subject matter will continue in the new fiscal year.

Coconuts: Coconuts continue in the collaboration between the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries and the Caribbean Agricultural Research and Development Institute (CARDI), which led to encouraging farmers' use of traps to reduce population numbers. Surveillance of species and the acquisition of the distribution of superior coconut varieties to deal with the impending threat of the Red Ring Disease and Red Palm Mite were implemented. Partnership with the Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture (IICA), and the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine to successfully train 20 staff members of the research division in diagnostic methods for plant diseases.

Coffee: Madam Speaker, in fiscal 2025 the coffee revitalization project will commence at the cost of \$3 million. The Ministry will acquire three varieties of Arabica coffee varieties to propagate and distribute to 20 farmers to revitalize 20 acres of coffee.

Madam Speaker, Giant African Snail: Throughout our extension units in north and south, 100 visits were conducted to residential farmers, businesses, schools, old age homes, and public spaces to monitor for incidence of this pest as well as the dissemination of related material and information, 1,355 monitoring visits and 68 awareness walks aimed at educating the public on this Giant African

Snail. A multi-prong approach was recommended and implemented which allows for the ongoing monitoring and surveillance where reports are received on spread. Public awareness campaigns, community meetings, training, exhibitions, dissemination of information via emails and telephone calls et cetera and baiting placement on farms, and open spaces where necessary. However, based on lessons learnt, the physical removal of the Giant African Snail must be reinforced.

Locust management. Egg bed team exercises continue in Dan Trace, Todds Road, and Palmiste areas as these are potential sites for the locust eggs beds. Mobilization of teams to conduct spraying activities in 197 litres of pesticide being applied to over 136 hectares. There were 279 calls received from the public with 459 surveillance visits conducted through the affected areas. Implementation of 57 locust public awareness programmes throughout the Regional Administration South.

Madam Speaker, I turn to praedial larceny. And this praedial larceny is a very important part of the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries. Madam Speaker, praedial larceny remains one of the major challenges for farmers across the country. In 2023, the Ministry embarked on a recruitment drive to increase the capacity of the praedial larceny squad. I am pleased to inform this honourable House that we have increased the complement from 34 officers in 2022 to 101 officers today.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

2.10 p.m.

Additionally, Madam Speaker, in this fiscal the praedial larceny received four new vehicles thereby increasing their current fleet to six operational vehicles. Madam Speaker, refurbishment works were also completed at the south-western

office dormitory located at Cap-De-Ville and the Carlsen Field office all in an effort to enable rapid response to incidents reported by the farmers.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: Madam Speaker, I just want to inform the honourable House that with receiving the four new vehicles recently in the last couple of months, it was all over that one of these vehicles was driven by a praedial larceny officer and it was crashed and written off. I want to inform the House that we at the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, especially the legal department have taken a serious stand on this. When you drive a vehicle you are supposed to take care of it, and since then they have taken a decision to dismiss the praedial larceny officer, and action is also being taken on how moneys could be recovered for this vehicle.

Madam Speaker, during the period 2023 to 2024, the praedial larceny conducted—and you know people like to say they “doh” do nothing and “dey dis and dey dat”, but I know first-hand they conducted 2,338 patrols; 27,916 visits to farms; 2,863 farmer interactions; 156 market visits; 489 farmer visits; received 195 reports; detected 160 offences; arrested 38 persons of which seven were imprisoned and 24 convictions. The unit continues to conduct its routine operations of patrol surveillance and investigations.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: Madam Speaker, I would like to just say, since I have been at the Ministry, I wonder why people like to—why they cannot plant their own produce? Why they cannot mine their own animals? Why do you have to go and steal somebody’s animal? I mean, we always find all the reasons to blame the praedial larceny, but we should be targeting on the criminals out there who are

going in there and interfering. Imagine a man mines a calf from small and the calf gets big and he is finding a way to put that calf in the back of a pick-up and go and sell it. I mean, it is wrong. We cannot do that. We are not supposed to do that. While I am on that also, these animals that are coming in from Venezuela, we have to be very careful when you are buying these animals coming in on those boats because you do not know what sickness and diseases are coming into the country.

I have been down there, I am not just talking off the top of my head. I have been together with the Member for Point Fortin down there. We are working with the coast guard and the Praedial Larceny Squad and the police, and they are going down there and buying these animals and selling them cheaper than the ones that the farmers and the livestock people are taking their time and feeding and bringing them for us to buy and eat healthy.

In the upcoming year fiscal2025', the Ministry remains committed to enhancing the operational effectiveness of the Praedial Larceny Squad under the *Development Programme* with a total allocation of \$2.6 million. The funds will support critical initiatives and strengthen the squad's capacity to protect our farmers and their livelihoods.

Forest regeneration: Madam Speaker, the Ministry continues to place focus on forest regeneration programmes and provide services to the establishment of commercial timber plantations for the sawmill and the woodworking sector. The production of 132,000 seedlings, monitoring of 117 sawmills and 77 registered furniture shops through monthly and quarterly inspections for annual licences.

Forest protection: In addition, protecting the state's forests and wildlife resources and reducing losses due to forest fires, the Ministry's major activities were, one, management and protection of 36 forest reserves and 11 wildlife

sanctuaries, and conducting markings and improvements in 200 hectares of mixed natural forest, clearing 142 kilometres of external fire traces at a cost of \$100,153. Wildlife management: Over the last fiscal the Forestry Division under the wildlife management engaged five communities for the co-management of nesting marine turtles which facilitated the sale of 12,326 permits generating \$55,697 in revenue; conducted wetland inventory studies to determine the status of wetland systems at the Caroni Swamp; completed the sale of 7,978 state-game licences to 5,237 hunters generating an income of—a revenue of \$797,008.

Madam Speaker, over the last fiscal Trinidad and Tobago made significant contributions to CARICOM's 25 by 25 Initiative. We saw an increase in rice, coconut, cocoa, coffee and livestock production as a result of formal agreements such as the Trinidad and Tobago Guyana Food Development Plan.

Madam Speaker, I turn to rice. Madam Speaker, the rice continues to be an important sector. In fiscal 2023, a strategic decision was taken to revitalize and modernize the local rice industry so that it can contribute towards increasing local food security and reduce the near 100 per cent dependence on imports of this important staple food. A collaboration with the National Flour Mills for the first time, provision of contracts to the rice farmers and a payment of an additional incentive for grade 1 and grade 2 rice, have contributed positively to the development of the rice industry.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: Furthermore, Madam Speaker, there were improved paddy yields due to the supply of 200,000 pounds of superior, high-yield, disease-resistant rice seeds which were distributed to farmers from Caroni, Felicity, El Carmen, Barrackpore and Plum Mitan.

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Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: This initiative renewed rice farmers' interest to increase their production and was a notable outcome of this country signing a memorandum of understanding with the Guyana Republic. Total production in 2022 was 183 tonnes and the importation of rice has shown a decreasing trend over the period. An average of 800 metric tonnes of rice has been harvested at the average cost of \$2,500,166.

Madam Speaker, several activities aimed at supporting revitalization and modernization of the rice industry—

Madam Speaker: Minister, you have two more minutes of original speaking time left. You are entitled to 10 additional minutes to wind up your contribution. Do you intend to avail yourself of the additional time?

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: Yes.

Madam Speaker: Yes. You may proceed.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, in my view this is one of the biggest Ministries in the Government and it is food and we are doing a lot in the Ministry, and who has eyes to see, could see, and who has ears to hear, will hear.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: I am focusing on the positives at the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries. Madam Speaker, cocoa. The Trinidad and Tobago cocoa sector is highlighted. Madam Speaker, everything that I am saying here, it is facts, you know. This is factual. This comes from the records at the Ministry.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

2.20 p.m.

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: Cocoa is identified as the strategic crop in *Vision 2030*, the country's development document. Cocoa is cultivated in six agro-ecological zones. There are approximately 800 active farmers on 400,000 hectares of land, producing an average of 5 to 600 meters per year. Approximately 20 to 30 per cent of production is converted to value added products by vertical integrated farms, and 80 valued processors into the range of value added products, such as chocolates, which we have the best of; spreads—that is like margarine, you spread this chocolate; drinks; baked goods; and produce products that can be found in many supermarkets, gourmet shops and cafés.

Current demand for cocoa beans is estimated at 1,000 to 1.5 per annum, and it is projected to be 200 metres by 2029. It is projected that 50 per cent of this can be exported and the remainder can be converted to value added products. With the implementation of targeted interventions identified in the strategic plan for the Cocoa Development Company, this sector can now grow to over US \$100 million in a five-year period, 2024 to 2029.

We have tried—we are embarking on digitization and the adoption of technology. Madam Speaker, this Government has initiated the digitizing and adopting of technology as a priority to improve the agricultural sector. The Government in its *National Development Strategy 2016—2030* has made concrete commitments to build and innovate culture, and to create a business environment that is conducive to entrepreneurship and innovation.

Madam Speaker, when I went to the Ministry, there have been a lot of complaints saying that it is difficult to get a farmers registration card. This has

now changed and once you have all the necessities, it is very easy now to access a farmer's registration data card. It is digitized, and I want to thank the Minister of Digital Transformation, Mr. Bacchus, for working with the Ministry in a short space of time to ensure that when somebody comes to Ministry, they can get their farmer's badge.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: And this why I also want to thank Minister Avinash Singh, who has worked tirelessly on this programme to ensure that when people come to the Ministry, they get good service at the Ministry.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: And while I am there, I made sure that—because this is a temporary office I hold. I could be here today, and tomorrow—just like everybody else, right? You are here today, and tomorrow—do not get too carried away, we will be here in the term too. So do not get too carried away.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: We also have a lot going on in those areas. Madam Speaker, it so much at the Ministry—I have so much to talk about but I will continue where I belong, in the other place. I want to say—oh, the bee abate programme. And somebody was telling me, like I have honey on me, because they said that I was being followed for the last three days, but something “hadda be sweet about me”.

So the bee abate programme is focused on ensuring public safety. And you know, anybody who calls—anybody who has a problem concerning bees and so on, once you call the Ministry, or you call me directly—because everybody has my number. The first person who put my number out in the public—well, he is not

here anymore, it was one Mr. Devant Maharaj, and the number is out in the public, so they call me. If they have any problems with the bees, in whatever area it is, we will take care of it for you all.

I want to touch a lil couple of minutes on the EMBD, which is the Estate Management and Business Development Company. For fiscal 2023 to 2024, a total of 180 deeds were completed in-house, at the EMBD, as follows: 85 deeds of variations; 62 deeds of rectifications; 18 deeds of subleases, 12 outstanding, six subleases; 18 deeds of surrender; seven deeds of release and waivers. Out of 180 deeds, 122 were registered in September 2024.

I want to turn a little to livestock. It is so much on livestock. Madam Speaker, another notable example of interministerial collaboration, advancing the agricultural agenda—we have done so much there. In closing, Madam Speaker, I would like to say, I am pleased to report on the remarkable success of the recently concluded TT Agri-Expo 2024—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein:—which exemplifies the significant strides we have made in collaborations with key Ministries and stakeholders. This event has become a cornerstone in our effort to alleviate the agricultural sector and foster economic growth. Madam Speaker, I saw all walks of life of people there, people, the young, the not so young, the old, the people who want to become farmers, and a lot had to be—there is so much to be said. I even saw the Member for Cumuto/Manzanilla watching some sheep and goat and so on, and “I doh know if he going into farming next”, but I know—

Hon. Member: Yes.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: Yeah. But so much was going on, eh.

Madam Speaker, I just want to—with the couple of minutes I have left, I want to acknowledge my colleague from La Horquetta/Talparo who—we have been working together for these two years, and something, to ensure that 18 to 35—and we will take care of the over 35. So I want to continue to work with you.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: A lot has been done for the youth in agriculture and young people in agriculture, because hydroponics is the way to go now, and the schools are doing it, the churches are doing it, everybody is into to agriculture now. And you know, I have a saying, it is, “Get something and grow.” There is a calypso about—some calypso about something—but my thing is, get something and grow, and grow what you eat and eat what you grow.

Madam Speaker, I want to thank you and thank the entire House here for giving me this opportunity to make this contribution, because we have done a lot in agriculture, and we will continue, and we will report to the people—it is no secret what we are doing. We will continue to ensure that everybody, all farmers, fisherfolk, livestock people get their worth at the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries. I want to thank the staff at the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries—the Permeant Secretary and the staff for being—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: I gave them a mandate, when anybody comes to the Ministry, it does not matter who, treat them with dignity because those are the people who are feeding this nation.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: With these few words, Madam Speaker, I want to thank you for giving me this opportunity.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Fyzabad.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

2.30 p.m.

Dr. Lackram Bodoë: Thank you. Thank you very much, Madam Speaker, for the opportunity to contribute to this 2025 financial year budget debate. I will not say too much on the contribution of my good friend, the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, except to invite him to visit the Otaheite fishing facility at his convenience to address some of the pressing issues with the fishermen in that area.

Hon. Members: If he has a potential PNM candidate, he might make himself available.

Dr. L. Bodoë: The other issues that were raised by the hon. Minister will be addressed by my colleague, the Member of Parliament for Couva North. Madam Speaker, before I continue I just want to reflect on and commend the response of the Leader of the Opposition last Friday in this budget debate.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. L. Bodoë: The Member for Siparia's contribution was a clinical dissection of the budget presentation.

Dr. Moonilal: Poetic.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. L. Bodoë: And of course, the policies that she proposed represent very well the solutions that are required to take our country forward. And of course it shows, Madam Speaker, that the Leader of the Opposition, the Member for Siparia, is well

prepared, willing and able, I must say, to take over the reins of Government soon—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. L. Bodoë:—as soon as that opportunity arises. Allow me also, Madam Speaker, to commend my colleagues on this side who have spoken and have made some very able contributions. I also want to take the opportunity to thank the great constituents of Fyzabad. The constituents have been very patient over the last nine years.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. L. Bodoë: They have showed our national virtues in terms of patience and tolerance in terms of what they have had to endure under this Government, but I want to give them the assurance that as soon as the Government changes under a UNC Government that all of the issues will be fixed, so I want to thank them for that—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. L. Bodoë:—and for giving me the opportunity to have served them and to represent them for the last nine years. Madam Speaker, I also want to take this opportunity before I go into the meat of my contribution to thank the staff at my constituency office led by my very capable and abled office manager Mr. Dale Kawal, and the rest of the staff, and all of those who have supported me during the last nine years in Fyzabad.

So, Madam Speaker, my plan in this time is just to respond to a few of the issues that the Minister of Health raised, to raise a few other issues in the health sector and also to speak on some constituency matters. Madam Speaker, the Member for St. Joseph opened with an acronym used by my colleague for Oropouche West, and he attempted to account for the expenditure under the health

sector. I will use a different acronym as my theme today and my acronym will be VFM, Value for Money.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. L. Bodoë: Madam Speaker, during the Minister's contribution trying to account for some \$7.5 billion allocated this year and also trying to account for the sum of \$56.89 billion spent under his Ministry in the last nine years did not use the term "Value for Money" even once in his contribution.

Madam Speaker, Ministers of Finance, not only in Trinidad and Tobago but throughout the world, are always in a dilemma when it comes to expenditure in the health sector. Returns on investment in health care are sometimes difficult to calculate in monetary terms, but I assure you that the benefits are measurable if you set targets and if you put in place certain performance indicators, and I dare say this is what has been missing under the performance of this Government in the health sector. Now the Minister of Health spoke about people, process and product, I like that term. I like those terms and I will hinge on those terms with regard to contribution, as I go forward. I agree with this model and I will elaborate on some of these. I also want to add two more Ps to the discussion which will help to complete the picture, and those Ps are policy and plant.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. L. Bodoë: Madam Speaker, despite tremendous expenditure in relation to the overall budget allocation under this Government, there seems to be a disconnect between the vast sums of money spent annually and the quality and quantity of health care services delivered to citizens, and this is the product I believe that the hon. Minister was speaking about when he used the term "product", and we will talk more about the product as I go forward.

Madam Speaker, there are still many complaints from patients trying to access health care services, I will not burden the House with the sources of these, but on a daily basis there are still complaints of long waiting times in the Accident & Emergency, long wait for beds, long waiting times for clinic appointments for elective surgeries, for investigations, X-rays, MRI, CT scans, blood tests and so on, and there are still complaints about drug shortages, and of course there are issues and complaints about the care of babies and their mothers in our NICU and maternity units. It is a matter I will come to later on in my contribution.

So, Madam Speaker, the big question is, are citizens getting value for money? The Minister of Finance himself in this House, in the mid-year budget review on the 6th June, when faced with a request by the Minister of Health for an allocation of an additional sum of \$495,286,000 during the Standing Finance Committee stage, and I quote the words of the Minister of Finance here. And these are the Minister's words from the *Hansard*:

Another \$5 billion or so is proving quite difficult to finance the purchases of free pharmaceuticals and to find that \$500 million is going to prove to be difficult. So, understand—I still quote, Madam Speaker—that we as a country spent huge amounts on health care—I agree—and it is something we need to look at to make sure what we are getting, value for money—and so on.

So, Madam Speaker, the Minister of Finance himself perhaps is sending a message to his colleague in the Ministry of Health. Say, “Hey, listen, are we getting value for money for these vast sums of expenditure in the health sector”? Madam Speaker, in relation to financing of pharmaceuticals, before I leave that topic here, based on the figures provided to us we see that the bill for pharmaceuticals and non-pharmaceuticals including CDAP is close to some \$700

million annually according to the Ministry of Health's figures.

At a Public Account Enterprise committee meeting on the 15th May this year in this very House, when NIPDEC and officials from the Ministry of Health participated in that enquiry, we learnt that financing has been used to raise some of this \$700 million during the past few years. I make this point simply to state that when you look at the cost of financing—I will just give an example for three loans, and the three loans amounted to \$823,912,888. The interest on these loans is amounting and will cost taxpayers another \$130,362,545.

I know borrowing is sometimes important, but I make the point just to say that it means that when the Government borrows to fund these key items, it means that the actual cost of drugs and supplies to the taxpayer is higher and therefore it is more reason to ensure value for money and accountability. So I ask, Madam Speaker, what is the issue, is it a process issue? Is it an issue of process, in terms of the running of the health sector? It is an issue with what we call the “supply chain disconnect”? And I want to give the assurance to the population that, you know, under a UNC Government we will fix these issues, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. L. Bodoë: There will be no more issues of stock out when you get a prescription, there will be no more surgeries being postponed because hospitals and doctors do not have this and they do not have that. So, Madam Speaker, I just want to move on in terms of the people, so we spoke a bit about the process and I will come back to other issues with process but let us go to the people, the other factor that is important in the equation and this equation of the delivery of health care.

So, according to the hon. Minister, the Ministry of Health, 67.1 per cent of the annual budget allocation in health was for the four regional health authorities in

Trinidad. This amounts to some \$4.2 billion, and of this amount \$3.7 billion is spent on salaries and wages. So it is spent on people, and we are grateful for that. We have some 21,000 workers in the health care sector, mostly RHAs and they need to be well compensated. It is a fact that, you know, people are the backbone of health care delivery and so on. So I will come back and deal with some of the people issues in the health sector, but before I speak about that allow me to just go back to the plant issues, because I think it is important to put into perspective, as far as the plant, and when I say plant I mean plant and infrastructure, means hospitals and health centres. You know, a very good platform was laid by the UNC, the People's Partnership Government in 2010 to 2015—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

2.40 p.m.

It will be remiss of me not to mention the completion of the Scarborough Hospital, the San Fernando Teaching Hospital in 2014, adding an additional 230 beds to the health care sector, the Couva children's hospital, another 230 beds, and of course we are well aware that the sod turning for the Point Fortin and Arima Hospitals were done under the Partnership. And the Member for Point Fortin will be very aware that there was a completely refurbished health centre in Point Fortin. And the Member for La Brea would be very familiar with the new health centre in Palo Seco. In addition, of course, Madam Speaker, we refurbished and repaired over some 40 health centres.

So there is enough plant and infrastructure in the health sector, Madam. There is no shortage of that. There are more structures coming on board and so on, but the issue now would be to provide people to run these plants and provide health care and more than people, Madam Speaker, the issue would be to look at the

processes of how we deliver health care and how that can be changed. So who are the people in the health sector, Madam? So at the RHA level we speak to the boards and the senior management. Those are very important people, Madam Speaker, very, very, important. These are the people who are responsible for delivering the health care product, according to the policy which is formulated by the Ministry of Health and the Minister of Health and the Government. This requires responsible, competent and innovative people, Madam Speaker. You need to have people in those position, you know, who are be innovative, who can think outside the box and find solutions, because in health care sometimes situations can arise where there is no learning, there is no precedent. It requires people with a patient agenda, Madam Speaker, not a political agenda.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. L. Bodoë: Madam Speaker, it requires people who will put patients first.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. L. Bodoë: And, Madam Speaker, it requires people who will put back the care in health care, and this is what this country is lacking.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. L. Bodoë: But, Madam Speaker, I dare say that this Minister continues to put square pegs in round holes at the board level and as a result several CEOs and certain managers do what they want, Madam Speaker. There is lack of accountability in the running of some of these RHAs. You know, Madam Speaker, I just want to give an example, you know, let us look for example at how staff is recruited at the SWRHA. Earlier this week in one of the newspapers, there are two ads. Both are ads for vacancies in the South-West Regional Health Authority and there are two sets of vacancies. So one speaks to Photographer, Communications

Assistant and Nutrition & Dietetic Attendant. But the point I am making here, Madam Speaker, is that the applications for these ads have to be sent to the Human Resources Department, South-West Regional Health Authority, Level 2. Very familiar with that, I was the chairman there and this is the correct procedure, Madam Speaker. There is nothing wrong with that, that is where applications for employment is supposed to go.

But, Madam Speaker, an ad on the other page of this newspaper on the same day that is trying to recruit a Manager, Corporate Communications, a Nurse Manager, Secondary Services and a Security Services Manager. The applications, you are invited to send your applications to:

“Office of the Chairman of the Human Resources Committee at the South-West Regional Health Authority”.

Now, Madam Speaker, the human resources committee is a board committee. The chairman of that committee, if I am not mistaken, and I know things have changed, it is a board member. So I am just wondering why it is that these applications have to go to that particular office first. Is it not correct that the appropriate thing is that the application should be processed at the level of the human resource department. But I leave that there, Madam Speaker, and I move on.

So, Madam Speaker, what is happening at the SWRHA, what is happening with the process, how is it working? You know, Madam Speaker, I am told, I am told that there is was power outage in the laboratory at the San Fernando General Hospital last night and the auxiliary generator did not activate.

Hon. Member: What!

Dr. L. Bodoë: Do you know what happened, Madam Speaker? As a result, blood products have been compromised and no blood products can be provided for

elective cases at this time. Madam Speaker, blood is currently being sourced nationally for emergencies only. I raise this because the issue of generators at the San Fernando Hospital has been raised before.

Mr. Indarsingh: And Mount Hope.

Dr. L. Bodoë: In Mount Hope, but before I go there, Madam Speaker, when this happens it means, when you prepare yourself and you take the time off and you go to the hospital for an elective procedure, you know, there is a lot, you waited already, you have made the sacrifice and so on, only to be told that your surgery was postponed. Madam Speaker, it is heartbreaking. I have one constituent who visits my office every day I am in office and her problem is that she has been trying to get her cataract surgery done for the last three years—

Mr. Indarsingh: “Ohhh.”

Dr. L. Bodoë: And, you know, Madam Speaker, she gets this excuse and that excuse. There is something wrong with the process; there is something wrong with the process.

So, Madam Speaker, this is just one of the issues, there are other issues of course at the SWRHA. We have the lack of ambulances—well them being non-functional because of the breakdown and so on. This is an issue when you have the transfer critically ill patients from the Siparia District Health Facility and indeed from the Point Fortin Hospital to the San Fernando General Hospital. So, Madam Speaker, I will leave that matter there and move on. And, you know what, Madam Speaker? It is no better at the other RHAs, Madam Speaker. So, for example, let us just look at what is happening at the NCRHA with regard to process.

Madam Speaker, quite often on a regular basis we see full page ads being

taken out in the newspapers telling about the work of the NCRHA, work that is part of their remit, work that does not need to be advertised. This is what they are receiving the allocations for. So we see full page ads but these full page ads are taking precedence over repairing the leaking ceiling of the dinner room at the Mount Hope Women's Hospital. It is taking precedence over the fixing of the electrical system at the Eric William Medical Sciences Complex.

And also, the expenditure there could have been put to better use in terms of providing full operating lists for the surgeons in the Eric William Medical Sciences Complex. Madam Speaker, I want to invite the Minister of Health to check with the general surgical listing at the Eric William Medical Sciences Complex and find out if it is true that general surgeons are allowed to operate only once per month. That is perhaps the reason why the waiting list for surgeries are so long.

Madam Speaker, there is a patient who has to have something called a reversal of a colostomy. A colostomy is when you have a surgery and at that time the surgeons cannot connect back your bowel, they take out a piece of your bowel, you are left with a bag, it is called stoma. So you walk around with this bag and you become very anxious. It creates a lot of physiological issues because you are walking with a bag that is draining faeces and you have to be very cautious. Your whole life is limited. Therefore, you know, Madam Speaker, when the time comes to reverse that colostomy, that is the name of the procedure, when that time comes you await very anxiously, the date for that surgery and if it is that you were told that it is going to take two years, three years, when that should have been done in six months, then it creates a lot of distress for patients and this is the point I am making.

So, Madam Speaker, I move on there. We spoke about the people, we spoke

about the people who are at the helm, the managers and the board members and so on, but there is also the issue with the doctors, they are also people within the health sector that we talked about. I have to go back to this. I have to ask: How many of these young doctors are waiting on their house officer positions?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. L. Bodoë: Just a few weeks ago we would have had so many new interns graduate and they join the line now. But more than that, Madam Speaker, you know, what is the process for appointing house officers? I am told that it is being done in a way that if you know someone there you get house officer position. I invite the Minister of Health to look into this, you know, Madam Speaker, it seems to be happening with some of the RHAs. People are jumping the queues and so on. Is there a process? I invite the Minister to state whether it is a process for doing this thing in a fair and transparent manner.

Mr. Indarsingh: There is no integrity in the process.

Dr. L. Bodoë: Yes, of course. Madam Speaker, I also invite the Government, so many unemployed doctors, young doctors. Have any opportunities been explored within CARICOM, Madam Speaker, to find work for these doctors? Is that something that is being explored? Madam Speaker, have any opportunities being explored in nearby Guyana? I had the privilege to visit Guyana just a few months ago, wearing the other hat I wear as a medical practitioner to attend a conference. There are nine new hospitals being built in Guyana and they will require a lot of doctors. So I am sure that the Government is aware of that and I am just asking whether any attempt is being made to explore those opportunities.

2.50 p.m.

Madam Speaker, there is another issue with regard to doctors who work at

the regional health authorities and this is the issue of appointing consultants with specialist medical officers, and I am told, Madam Speaker, that the criteria for appointing these senior doctors—because the buck stops with these doctors. They are the ones who have the highest level of knowledge and skills and so on. At the end of the day they are responsible for your life, literally speaking, when you go there as a patient. I am told that the criteria may be different amongst some of the different RHAs. Again, I want to invite the Minister of Health to look at this and see whether there is a matter of expediency, or for other reasons—I do not want to go into that, Madam Speaker—that you have appointments taking place where you may not have the same quality in terms of the specialists at the different RHAs. But, Madam Speaker, we will fix that. We will fix that.

I think it is important the time has reached, Madam Speaker, in terms of all of this health care expenditure to have something called a central recruitment agency. When I worked in the UK, Madam Speaker, all doctors at a certain level were recruited at a central agency in a fair and transparent manner and so on, and then the State—in this case the Government—would use the list to allocate doctors amongst the different RHAs according to the needs. So you do not end up with a situation where you have a large number of doctors at one institution where less work is being done. So there is a mismatch. In other words, you have a longer waiting time in one RHA as opposed to the other. That needs to be fixed, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, I will move on quickly to the issue of nurses. Again, the nurses seem to be receiving a raw deal under this Government. Last year, if I may refer to an article here, on the 5th of August, with the call for increased patient to staff ratio, salary increases and so on, one year after, Madam Speaker, I doubt that

anything has improved in terms of the working conditions for nurses. Again, we talk about the people, we talk about people in the health sector, but are we really treating—is this Government really treating with these issues?

I will just raise one issue that the Head of the Trinidad and Tobago Nurses Association raised, and he said that part of the shortage of nurses was that the RHAs would take them off the ward to staff the authority's ambulances. This is a fall down in the process, Madam Speaker. You cannot take highly trained individuals, nurses, with qualifications and skill and put them in ambulances and so on, because you perhaps do not have enough emergency medical personnel.

The President of the TTNA is saying this, Madam Speaker. And, of course, when they leave the ward you have understaffing on the ward and then you wonder why things happen on the ward. You know, Madam Speaker, there seems to be a lack of vision, a lack of leadership at the highest level of the Ministry of Health and perhaps this Government. Citizens are not getting value for money, Madam Speaker, if I am to answer the question that I asked myself at the beginning of this contribution.

So, Madam Speaker, the RHA Act is now some 30 years old and it remains a good model, but perhaps the time has come to review and tweak how the RHAs are run, and, Madam Speaker, I dare say that a UNC Government will undertake such a review—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. L. Bodoë:—to ensure without the loss of any jobs, because people will jump up and say you are going to fire people. That is not the idea. The idea is to review to ensure that citizens once again receive value for money from the RHAs.

There needs to be some sort of tweaking in terms of how the models are run.

But before I leave the issue of people, Madam Speaker, allow me to thank all the health care workers in this country who go beyond the call of duty in the most difficult circumstances under this Government to deliver health care on a daily basis to suffering citizens. We ask them to remain strong, Madam Speaker. Their own suffering will come to an end when those opposite exit the corridors of power—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. L. Bodoë:—and return to where they belong on this side.

Moving on, Madam Speaker, I want to turn to some other matters that the Minister raised in his contribution, and that is to speak briefly on the issue of CDAP. At a recent PA(E)C meeting that I alluded to earlier in my contribution, Madam Speaker, the Nipdec officials indicated that some 186,000 patients were registered for CDAP with some 49 drugs in the formulary. The Minister indicated that we had something against CDAP. Madam Speaker, I want to give the population the assurance that we on this side have absolutely nothing against the CDAP programme. In fact, we believe—I want to make it clear we believe that it is an important mechanism in the fight against our biggest enemy in this country after the crime, that is, Madam Speaker, and that is our NCD burden. We believe that and we agree with that.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. L. Bodoë: All we want to do, Madam Speaker, with regard to CDAP is, we want to ensure that the most efficacious drugs are available to patients as determined by the medical experts and not the politicians.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. L. Bodoë: So, Madam Speaker, we will ensure that CDAP remains available

to those citizens who need it and with the most appropriate drugs for their conditions.

Madam Speaker, I move on quickly now to some other matters in the health sector, some of which come directly under the purview of the Ministry of Health. So there is something called the vertical services which come directly under the purview of the Ministry of Health and the Minister of Health. These services are provided aside and apart from those provided by the RHA, and, Madam Speaker, one of these vertical services has to do with the insect vector control. The Minister of Health in his entire contribution managed to avoid any reference to dengue cases, Madam Speaker, or the Insect Vector Control Division. So, Madam Speaker, I want to ask whether the Insect Vector Control Division is the abandoned child of the Ministry of Health.

There have been many shortcomings of this department which have been highlighted in light of the current dengue outbreak. And at one point, of course, we had the usual blame game which has been plagued as to who is responsible for what, who had to spray this, spray that, spray the other, and, of course, I want to take the opportunity to congratulate the Siparia Borough Corporation, the Penal/Debe Regional Corporation—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. L. Bodoë:—and all the other UNC-led corporations for their leadership in taking the initiative in this fight against dengue. There are currently still many problems I am informed, with regard to the shortage of chemicals and the shortage of safety gear for workers and so on.

Madam Speaker, before I leave the issue, the Insect Vector Control Division, I am informed and I hope I am really wrong on this, but if you are looking for a

good second-hand vehicle in good condition for a good price, the place to go is the Insect Vector Control Division. Madam, I am told that you can get a good vehicle for \$2,000. It just requires a little change of part here and there, Madam Speaker.

How can you acquire it, Madam Speaker? Minister of Finance, how can you acquire it? You can acquire it because apparently these vehicles are auctioned and friends and financiers and those in the know are invited to bid for these vehicles, Madam Speaker. I leave that there, Madam Speaker. And, of course, Madam Speaker, in the budget allocation for the Insect Vector Control Division, I want to ask the Minister of Health whether the Jerningham Junction Office, which is the main office of the Insect Vector Control Division, which currently has no air condition and therefore the staff report there at eight o'clock and they leave at 8.15 a.m. because they cannot work, whether the \$2 million allocation to the Insect Vector Control Division will fix that problem? And I leave that right there, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, I want to move on to something that is very dear to me, not only as a Member of Parliament, but also as a medical practitioner of some 40 years in obstetrician/gynaecologist, and I want to speak briefly with regard to the disaster that occurred at the neonatal intensive care unit of the Port of Spain General Hospital in April. This week made six months, Madam Speaker, since that tragedy occurred of nine babies being lost in a matter of four days. There was a reflection in the newspaper where one of the mothers was wondering aloud whether the—the headline is whether “we have been forgotten”. You know, very interesting, Madam Speaker, in my preparation for this budget contribution I took the opportunity to go through the budget statements of this Government since 2016, and in every single budget statement—I do not have the time to read into it,

but I have it here, Madam Speaker—this Government has alluded to having achieved both the global and regional 2030 targets for maternal child health and neonatal mortality.

Madam Speaker, I am very happy for this. This means that the country is doing well. The country has built on the platform again that was left to them by the People's Partnership Government and this is good for the country. But I only raise this in light of whether these gains have now been reversed in a serious way. And what has caused these gains to be reversed?

3.00 p.m.

I want to take the opportunity—again, this issue of neonatal mortality and maternal mortality always becomes an issue in this Parliament, but let me set the record straight. Let us talk about neonatal mortality, and the rate is deaths per 1,000 live births, Madam Speaker. In 2000, we were in a bad place, it was 17.6. In 2022, it has come down to 9.7. I do not know what the figure is going to be a 2024, Madam Speaker. Obviously, those figures are going to be different but you know, these things did not come overnight.

In 2010, when the Partnership entered Government, we met a rate of 14.2. In 2011, it was reduced to 13.8. In 2012, it came down to 13.4; 2013, it was 12.9; 2014, 12.5; and 2015, when the Partnership demitted office under the Member for Siparia, the rate was 12.2. So there has been a decrease. There has been a steady decrease in the neonatal mortality rates, Madam Speaker.

So the whole issue—the whole tragic issue is what has happened in the NICU at the Port of Spain General Hospital, and I raise this, simply in light of the PAHO Report. And at first, you know, when the report came out, there were many questions. The Ministry of Health indicated that he had to make certain enquiries

to PAHO. Madam Speaker, I want to advise the Minister of the Health that there are enquiries to be made, but it really should not be to PAHO. It should be to those who were charged with the responsibility—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. L. Bodoë:—for resourcing and managing the NICU unit at the Port of Spain General Hospital. And I trust, Madam Speaker, that as we speak, six months later and perhaps three months after the release of that report in June, that many of those recommendations, if not all, have been implemented with the allocation to health sector. I see the Minister of Finance is hoping for the same, Madam Speaker. I say this in light—in the Minister's contribution, you know, he said that he is taking personal responsibility for the children of this nation, but I also want to remind him, Madam Speaker—and I want to quote his words on the 26th of January, 2024, when he said:

“Our greatest asset is our children.”

I quote, Madam Speaker from the *Hansard* record. He said:

“Under my tenure, as Minister of Health, maternal mortality rates and infant mortality rates have dropped, and this was before the Directorate of Women's Health was appointed in 2017. I took personal responsibility to save our women who were dying at the rate of one a month. I took personal responsibility to save our children in our hospitals, and because of my direct intervention...”

—and so on, and so on. I invite the Minister to continue to take personal responsibility to make sure he fixes this matter before he demits office, which should be not in the near distant future.

Madam Speaker, I always want to raise one more question. I will move on

from the issue of babies who have died, to the issue of maternal mortality. Very disturbing information has come to my attention, Madam Speaker, and I really trust and hope that I am wrong about this. The death of a mother, a pregnant mother, a mother in childbirth, is a very stressful thing for the family, Madam Speaker, for both the loved ones and for the doctors as well who provide care. And if this is true, I want to empathize with the families, Madam Speaker. I want to ask, whether it is true that over the course of this year—and again, I trust that the Minister will say that this is not true—that there have been deaths of some five mothers in childbirth, or related to childbirth at the Mount Hope maternity hospital, Madam Speaker. It is very shocking news. This apparently has occurred during the course of this year and I want to ask, if this is true, whether any investigation has been done.

We spoke about the vertical services at the Ministry of Health, Madam Speaker, and one of those vertical services is a department called the Directorate of Women's Health. It was created by—through a report here, I do not want to wave this—I do not want to display it, Madam Speaker. The national population now would be very familiar with the report of the Maternity Services Review Committee, which was commissioned in pursuit of certain goals that the Partnership Government was fulfilling, in terms of the SDG goals for maternal mortality and so on, which would have been—the target would have been 2015. The Directorate of Women's Health would have been one of the recommendations, which the Government took and ran with, and that is fine.

The question I ask is, you know, what is the extent of the involvement of the Directorate of Women's Health in this issue, Madam Speaker? I raised this point simply because I want to say that in other countries—in the United Kingdom, for

example, where I worked for several years, when you have a maternal death, it is a big thing. It is a big thing for the family and so on, but it is not a political issue, Madam Speaker. It is an issue—

Mr. Young SC: *[Inaudible]*

Dr. L. Bodoë: It is an issue—

Mr. Young SC: *[Inaudible]*

Dr. L. Bodoë: It is an issue—Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West, it is an issue that, if it is handled properly, can create knowledge, information and learning, Madam Speaker, for others in the profession, and the benefit of that is that at the end of the day, you know, patients and mothers, and so on, have a better chance. Nobody is perfect.

So the learning is shared and one of the recommendations that was made in this report—and which has not been implemented—is the issue of creating a confidential enquiry. So it is not meant to point fingers, Madam Speaker. It is really meant to create a situation where you can have a national audit, which results in a national committee for confidential enquiries into maternal mortality. I invite the Minister of Health, who has this report on his desk, with the assistance of the Directorate of Women's Health, to look at forming this national committee for confidential enquiry into maternal mortality, so that whatever happens in these deaths and whatever may happen in the future, that learning could be shared, Madam Speaker.

Before I leave this issue, Madam Speaker, I want to give the basis for one of the policy points raised by the hon. Member for Siparia in the health sector, and that was the creation of a no-fault compensation scheme. In many circumstances, regardless of the best efforts to health care workers and so on, patients will die,

they will suffer injury, they will suffer less than optimal outcomes, and in that case, sometimes they will have to go through the court system.

With the greatest of respect to my colleagues here, Madam Speaker, and yourself, sometimes the outcomes do not match—the compensation does not match the injury, both the mental and physical that they would have suffered. Therefore, the issue of a no-fault compensation is well known in other countries, Madam Speaker, and the benefit of that, of course, is that it allows doctors to practise less defensive medicine and it creates an overall benefit for the country. So I just wanted to throw that on the table.

Madam Speaker, the issue of NCDs, non-communicable diseases, has been well ventilated by my colleagues who have spoken on the health sector. I will not repeat too much of what has been said, but there are a few issues that I wanted to raise and, of course, the Minister of Finance, in his budget presentation, did indicate that there is a tremendous burden, in terms of heart disease, diabetes, cancer, cerebrovascular disease. Madam Speaker, 70 per cent of these deaths occurred before the age of 70. It is a very alarming statistic. And the PAHO/WHO strategy report 2017-2021 stated that the economic burden from diabetes, hypertension and cancer to Trinidad and Tobago is about TT \$8.7 billion annually. So this is the economic burden, Madam Speaker. It is not the cost directly to the health sector. So it is a big burden in truth, indeed. It is approximately 5 per cent of our GDP.

So, there are two issues when one speaks of the NCDs, and one is the prevention and the other, of course, would be the treatment of the NCDs, because we have to fight the fire while trying to prevent it at the same time. I just want to reflect on the WHO's SDG Target 3.4, which speaks to "Noncommunicable

diseases and mental health”. The target, of course, is to:

“...reduce by one third premature mortality from...”—NCDs—“...through prevention and treatment and promote mental health and well-being”.

I want to take the opportunity today, Madam Speaker, to note that today is World Mental Health Day and, of course, you know, I encourage all Members on this sides and the other side to look at what we can do to strengthen and to take measures—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. L. Bodoë:—to look at how we can to improve our mental health. It is a big issue in Trinidad and Tobago, Madam Speaker.

3.10 p.m.

It is the elephant in the room, it is something that is underdiagnosed. We do not have the figures on the extent of mental disease within the population, Madam Speaker.

In the budget, it was noted that Trinidad and Tobago, in one of those documents that we have before us, has the third highest prevalence rate of mental illness: schizophrenia, mood disorders, behavioural disorders, substance abuse and suicide being the leading causes and of course, teenage mental health should be made a top national priority. Madam Speaker, I just want to leave that here by asking: What is the status of the mental health policy 2019—2029? We are now in 2024 and this policy is yet to be finalized, amongst several other policies that are being promised by this Government.

One of the interesting interventions I see being promoted is the issue of a call centre where those who have NCDs can call in now. I want to endorse the call centre. I have a few questions and I want to endorse the call centre, Madam

Speaker, but only to say regrettably that this suggestion from this side, it took six years to implement the suggestion. If you will permit me to read from the *Hansard* of 05 October, 2018, it sounds like budget time. This would have been a budget contribution and this is the Member of Parliament, myself, making this suggestion:

“Again, one of the initiatives that I think could make a big impact would be to find a way for the State to get a scale, a blood pressure machine and a glucometer in every home.

I know it sounds like a tremendous amount of expenditure...and now with WhatsApp, you can have those numbers...”—talking about your BP numbers and your sugar numbers and so on—“...sent in to a central centre...”—which is your call centre here, Madam Speaker—“...where they...”—can be—“...manned by your doctors and nurses...who could give advice and deal with the issues.”

So, Madam Speaker, this suggestion has been in the public domain for the last six years and I congratulate the hon. Member for St. Joseph for making that step. I think it would be beneficial in some way.

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member, you have two more minutes of ordinary time left. You have 10 additional minutes available to you to wind up, if you wish.

Dr. L. Bodoë: [*Inaudible*]

Madam Speaker: Okay. You may proceed.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. L. Bodoë: Thank you, Madam Speaker. So, Madam Speaker, I will move on. So just before I leave NCD clinics, NCD, Madam Speaker, I just want to put in a plug for those overworked doctors in the community clinics, in the primary care clinics. These are understaffed, especially when we have so many doctors looking

for employment. So there are two field doctors to see the patients, the doctors have essentially become prescription writers and because of that, patients sometimes do not get the ideal treatment in these clinics and that adds to the burden of the diabetic and heart and kidney disease.

Madam Speaker, I want to move on again. There is a lot said in the budget statement about the eye disease, your heart disease and kidney disease, but I just want to endorse one of the points that was made by the Leader of the Opposition, the Member for Siparia, in terms of creating and providing a stroke rehabilitation centre. It is an important intervention. Hypertension is a big issue and it is sometimes undiagnosed, and as a result, patients can suffer stroke and so on and therefore you need a dedicated centre where these patients with undergo rehabilitation. The facilities available in the public sector at the moment are less than ideal.

I want to throw out another suggestion to the Minister of Finance and the Minister of Health in terms of, you know, the detection of hypertension. Having a call centre is fine but that depends on people having their own machines and so on. Madam Speaker, there is a report which I came across in one of the documents here that was given to us which speaks to 0.06 per cent of the population, 10,000 people in 2021 were found to be multi-dimensionally poor. So that amounts to over 10,000 people.

My suggestion is, Madam Speaker, that even if these people want to call the call centre, they would not have the blood pressure machine to check their numbers. And therefore, I want to suggest to this Government to identify these 10,000 impoverished citizens, you will know because they already access services from the State, and give them a blood pressure monitor but tie it in to the fact that

they will call in their numbers on a regular basis to this new call centre, if it is established. It will cost you about \$5 million but I give you the assurance, and I give the country the assurance that the country will save much more in the long term.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*].

Dr. L. Bodoë: Madam Speaker, as I move on quickly, I just want to make a plug again for the cardiac Cath lab at the San Fernando hospital.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. L. Bodoë: I do not hold my breath that this will be built during this financial year. This has been promised since 2016 and we want to give the population the assurance that it will be built under the next Government which will be a UNC Government.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. L. Bodoë: You know, Madam Speaker, what passes for treatment in the public health sector when a patient suffers from chest pain is nothing short of a travesty. But that is something that you know I want to give the population the assurance.

Madam Speaker, it will be remiss of me not to deal with the issue of COVID and try to put it to rest once and for all. Let me make it very clear that under this Government, you know over 4,500 citizens died. That is a fact. It is also a fact that the Seemungal report showed without a doubt that the Minister of Health and this Government's management of COVID was an utter disaster.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. L. Bodoë: Madam Speaker, they were completely unprepared for this epidemic. They failed to educate the population and they created something called

vaccine hesitancy. They keep talking about the vaccines and so on, but the lack of education. You know six months before the vaccines become available, there was in the public domain, a report which the Minister of Health was privy to and I, myself, was there at the meeting which suggested that only 21 per cent of people in this country would take the vaccines. So they were slow as well in terms of procuring the vaccines.

You know, Madam Speaker, they keep bashing the Leader of the Opposition, the Member for Siparia in terms of certain pronouncements and so on, but it is a fact that some of the vaccines used in Trinidad and Tobago were associated with complications. All we were asking, all we are asking is what should have been done, is for patients to make an informed decision in terms of being aware of what complications were available, so I leave that there.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. L. Bodoë: Madam Speaker, before I move on to my constituency for my remaining few minutes, I just want to touch on the issue of cyber security. The Minister of Health indicated that the electronic medical records are important. I think that is very important because one of the biggest constraints in the efficient running of health care services is the availability of medical records. Many times, patients have their appointments postponed. Now after they wait six months, they go to the clinic and the doctor cannot see them simply because their records cannot be found. I think the time has come for that to be a thing of the past but also that we must take and put in place, I agree, that we must have proper cyber security legislation. That is to accompany any attempt to implement electronic medical records and patient information sharing on online platforms. So that is the issue of cyber security.

There is also the issue of bullying which has come to the domain. I just raise that quickly, Madam Speaker, because you know on a daily basis now, we are seeing the issues coming out in terms of school children. There is an issue in my own constituency which I trust the Minister of Education is dealing with in its pronouncements in the newspaper today. But I just want to make the point again that even though we have the issue of physical bullying, we also have the issue of cyber bullying and this can be very troubling for children and even for adults.

You know, Madam Speaker, I am aware of this because recently my wife and I were victims of this. You know I was shocked that people can bully you in this kind of way, in terms of being able to hide behind a fake profile and so on, but I leave that there. My point is not in any way suggesting that freedom of speech should be interfered with but just to make sure that the cybercrime unit has the appropriate teeth and so on to deal with these matters.

Madam Speaker, I will now move on to the constituency of Fyzabad—

Mr. Indarsingh: A great constituency.

Dr. L. Bodoë:—the great constituency of Fyzabad, and there are two issues. There are many issues in Fyzabad but there are two that I will raise and those two issues demonstrate how this Government treats with some citizens in Trinidad and Tobago.

3.20 p.m.

The first issue, Madam Speaker, is one that has already occurred despite several warnings to the relevant authorities. Today, the 10th of October, as I speak in this House, Madam Speaker, it is exactly three months, the 10th of July was when a bridge in St. John's Trace, Avocat, in my constituency, collapsed, Madam Speaker. You know the warning signs were there for all to see, you know. The

hon. Minister of Works and Transport actually walked on that bridge himself a few years ago, Madam Speaker, and saw what was going to happen. We predicted this was going to happen, Madam Speaker, its collapse. But more than that, Madam Speaker, three months after, three months after, the residents, all 40 residents, are still using a boat, Madam Speaker, to cross. Some of them have had to abandon their residents, Madam Speaker.

Mr. Indarsingh: [*Inaudible*]

Dr. L. Bodoë: Yeah, they have had to rent places, Madam Speaker. “Dey cyar use dey vehicles.” The vehicles remain abandoned. Despite my best efforts to the Ministers, you know, responsible, Madam Speaker, my good friend from San Fernando West, and the Minister of Works and Transport as well, they have not seen it fit, Madam Speaker, to visit those residents. They are all tax-paying citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, Madam Speaker. I checked for myself.

The other thing I wanted to bring to the attention of the Government, Madam Speaker, and to my friend from San Fernando West, is the issue on the Mosquito Creek, the cremation site, which houses hundreds of persons on a daily basis as they go to, you know, pay the last rights to their loved ones, Madam Speaker. This is the issue, Madam Speaker, of a gazebo which will very soon collapse into the shore of the Gulf of Paria, Madam Speaker, and I trust and hope that this site will not suffer the same faith as the bridge in St John’s Trace, Avocat, Madam Speaker. There are many, many other issues within the constituency of Fyzabad, which I will raise in different times and different places. Madam Speaker, with those few words I want to thank you for the opportunity to raise—

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Dr. L. Bodoë: I hear my friend playing the blame game. I will not be distracted, Madam Speaker. They say the politics of deflection is taking place here; blame somebody else.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. L. Bodoë: So, Madam Speaker, with those few words. I want to thank you again for the opportunity to make this contribution. I thank you.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Prime Minister.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

The Prime Minister (Hon. Dr. Keith Rowley): [*Spanish spoken*]

Mr. Imbert: What language is that Prime Minister? Spanish?

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Madam Speaker, I am just practising my Spanish in case I have to respond to the responder.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Madam Speaker, thank you very much for acknowledging and permitting me to enter into this debate on this fifth day in 2024. I want, Madam Speaker, to begin by thanking the Leader of the Government's effort to the Minister of Finance for the job that he and his team would have done for the people of Trinidad and Tobago over the last nine years. Madam Speaker, it is not easy to be responsible for grappling with the challenges of the people of Trinidad and Tobago, and to have done so successfully is worthy of commendation.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Madam Speaker, before I go into the substance of the debate, I want to just crave your indulgence, coming so late in the debate and representing the Government of Trinidad and Tobago, and as a parliamentarian of

long standing in this House, to reflect on how we have changed and not for the better.

Madam Speaker, as I listen to the commentary coming from some quarters in the country, especially from some of my parliamentary colleagues, especially the leadership, I find it worrisome that we have become so hateful, and that dishonesty, untruth, and hate have become the currency of some people's operations, to the point where, Madam Speaker, to use the word "colleague" is difficult with some of these people. And for me, it is hard because I can reflect on when it was a different time, but with the same responsibilities. The responsibility of offering oneself to serve in the country, accepting that responsibility when it is given to you, and proceeding to say yes, we are on different sides of the political divide, but we are in fact citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, and our efforts are singular in purpose. We should want the best for the country at all times. Madam Speaker, I do not see that. What I see is an attempt to get the population to respond to alternative truths. These are not the original phrases of mind, but I see such great similarity between Trinidad and Tobago, especially its Opposition, and the calamity that is happening in a large country up north, and I wonder who exactly their leader is. Who is leading the Opposition in this situation?

So we come here after nine years of being the Government of Trinidad and Tobago, and fortunately, the same Minister of Finance is in a position to expertly speak to all aspects of our finances. The Government takes the position that the country can benefit, and must benefit, from a comprehensive reporting of what we are facing, what we have been doing, where we are at, and where we are going. To do that, Madam Speaker, it takes time. But apparently to have reported so comprehensively to the country is to offend some people.

In fact, some of our Opposition Members, both inside and outside, of the House, the biggest issue for them was the length of the speech, how long the speech was. That was their première criticism, not that the Government had reported comprehensively, but that the speech was too long. Madam Speaker, that would not get them very far. So the next thing is to question everything that the Government has put forward.

So the Opposition leader, my colleague from Siparia, spoke for three and a half hours, and at the end of it, she fired a dud. It is called a blank. Did not realize that it had no impact on the population, so she had a press conference to double down on what she had said in this House to accuse the Minister of Finance of speaking untruths about the public debt, about the numbers of everything, and hoping to tell the country to not believe anything the Government said and that the Minister of Finance had, in fact, spoken untruths throughout the entire budget debate. That is the response of the Opposition to a budget which is really an estimate of how we will distribute what we intend to have as revenue in the next 12 months.

Madam Speaker, I want to say to the population of Trinidad and Tobago, if all your problems are wrapped up in what the Opposition has said, then as a country we are in a good place. If the best they could say about the Government is what they have said here for the last five days, then the Government has done a wonderful job.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: We have been managing a very difficult period in the country's history and you come here to respond to a budget, and all you could do is say the numbers are lying. Madam Speaker, across the world in all economic

classes and at institutions around the world, whether it is the IDB, the IMF, or whatever else.

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Madam Speaker, I did not disturb them.

Madam Speaker: But, please, Prime Minister, on a point of order, there is a particular word that I would need you to withdraw, okay, that you have used as a word that we have consistently ruled as unparliamentarily in this House.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: They like the word “untruth” because they think it is different. What is different between untruth?

Madam Speaker: Prime Minister, you know, Prime Minister—

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Indarsingh: It is the ruling of the Speaker.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: You will not tell me what to say.

Madam Speaker: Prime Minister, we have ruled consistently that that is not a word that is parliamentary. So if you withdraw the word, you know what word to use, and let us proceed.

3.30 p.m.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Madam Speaker, I withdraw the word “lie”.

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Madam Speaker: Just withdraw the word, do not repeat it, just withdraw and proceed.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: I withdraw the word, Madam Speaker, but I will continue, and I will not be guided by them. Madam Speaker, there are certain performance criteria that are used to measure situations in countries. And on this occasion, Madam Speaker, I want to just very quickly mention, with respect to GDP growth,

the Minister of Finance talked about 1.9 per cent. Madam Speaker, what we can do there is compare ourselves with others, because we do not live alone in this world. How are others doing with their circumstances and their challenges? Jamaica, 1.8 per cent; Barbados, 3.7 per cent; Guyana, booming at 33 per cent; Antigua, -2.8 per cent. Countries like us, Bahrain, Oman, Emirates—hydrocarbon economies—1.2 per cent, 2 per cent, and so on. So, that indicator tells us that we are doing something good. Inflation, 0.4 per cent, and look at 18 countries: Barbados, 2.7 per cent; Antigua, 2.2 per cent; Suriname, 14 per cent; Bahrain, 1.4 per cent; Qatar, 2.6 per cent; Japan, 2 per cent. Of 18 countries, we are the lowest of the 18 at 0.4 per cent.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: I looked at unemployment, 5.4 per cent up from 4 per cent. Barbados, 8.2 per cent; Bahamas, 8 per cent; of the same group of 18 countries most of them are approximating about 8 per cent, we are at 5.4 per cent. So while we have an unemployment problem, we measure pretty decently with the rest of other persons with their circumstances. The Bahamas, 8.8 per cent; Suriname, 10 per cent. If I google another comparator, per capita income, Madam Speaker. In 2016 our per capita income was \$17 billion, just over \$17 billion—17.2, it went to 17.3 in 2017, 17.6 in 2018. Madam Speaker, come 2020, COVID, it dropped to \$14.8 billion. But we know why. We worked at it, we stood our ground so by 2021 it was back to 17.4; 2023, 19.8. So, Madam Speaker, that is good realism, good performance, good situation. Because suppose we had not been able to bounce back from the \$14 billion economy?

We go to Human Development Index, Madam Speaker, notwithstanding all that you have heard, they call it doom and gloom, and that is their yardstick. All

that you have heard about how Trinidad and Tobago is a hellhole, but look at the International Human Development Index used by the authorities around the world to determine the quality of life in any country. And this is not our measurement, this is the measurement of independent persons looking around the world using the same yardsticks. Trinidad and Tobago ranks No. 60 on this scale of the countries around the world. And we are ranked, Human Development Index, 0.814.

And that on the system is very high human development which means life expectancy, access to education, health care and income distribution and so on, all of these things they put together to determine what goes on in a country and the quality of life in that country. We are ranked in the category of countries, very high human development. You know who is there with us? Barbados ranked No. 62. The Bahamas is ranked No. 57. Belize is ranked at No. 118. Jamaica is ranked No. 115. Argentina is ranked No. 48 with a 200 per cent inflation rate. But they are measuring in this one, quality of life, so no one index indicates comprehensively, the quality of life in a country. When you look at the Bahamas you will see Bahamas per capita income is higher than ours, right? And it says that they are ranked a little above “better quality of life”, but if you go to inflation and you go to unemployment, you will see Bahamas with an 8 per cent unemployment. So, Madam Speaker, when we speak to the country here, we want the country to understand that we are not alone on this planet, judge us by how well we are doing as compared to others.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: So having said that, Madam Speaker, I know I do not have a lot of time but I just want to just touch on a couple of things. There was one point that was made by the Member of Parliament for Chaguanas West. The

Member for Chaguanas West raised an issue about doing something to bring our children home from the conflict zones. And he spoke very emphatically about that. Madam, it is not that we are not doing anything but it is a very difficult assignment, and I want to give the Member the assurance that what is in place, we continue to try to make an effort to bring those children back here. And if we can get that done, I think that issue would be a—[*Inaudible*] behind us.

And, you know, what we have to do and what we are working on is to create a mechanism for the Government to control the return and entry of Trinidad and Tobago nationals from conflict zones abroad. So that would require a special majority in that legislation, and today I am instructing the Attorney General to speak to all Members on the other side especially those who have indicated, and as the draft is ready, to make the draft available to them, and we will see who will come to this House and support it so we can advance that.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: I heard the Member for Mayaro say that he will support legislation that he thinks is in the public interest. We have a control operations Bill to come to enable law enforcement to conduct undercover operations and gather evidence while maintaining public safety and ensuring successful prosecution. As soon as that draft is available I will ask the Attorney General to make it available to them on the other side, and then we come back to House and we will see who will vote for it and— [*Inaudible*].

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: We have a firearms amendment Bill to come, to ban assault weapons and high-powered rifles from this country's streets, and I want to see who is going to support that. We are looking at it in CARICOM, as soon as the draft—

we are talking about a template from the CARICOM—

Mr. Indarsingh: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Member, please, let us hear the Prime Minister in silence.
Prime Minister.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: They had all that they had to say, I did not interrupt one of them, I listened in horror at most of them. So I will speak in silence. Madam Speaker, there is a requirement to bring legislation to ban assault weapons in Trinidad and Tobago, and we will ask our colleagues on the other side to support that legislation so assault weapons will have no place in Trinidad and Tobago, purchased anywhere or illegally entering this country.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: So that is that. Madam Speaker, I want to express my sincerest condolences to the family of that young schoolboy, his name was Jayden, who took his own life because of how he was being persecuted in the school. Madam Speaker, nobody should have—no parent should have to bury a child. But to have to bury one under those circumstances, it is particularly punishing. And then while I was trying to digest that, another piece of news came up where a citizen had killed a wife and a baby, 18-month-old baby. And I am told that he was on the way to the school to try to kill the other child. For God's sake, suppose he had got to that school and had killed that second child in and among the other schoolchildren?

3.40 p.m.

Madam Speaker, what is going on in our society? And we have no control over the thought of criminal conduct. We can only respond to them after they have

done it. But then the press will ask people in the street, “What do you think?” And the headline is quoting the man talking to his mother:

“‘I killed Geeta and the child’...”

And asked somebody in the street, “What do you think about that?” They said, “Trinidad is a very messed up country. The Prime Minister needs to step down, only so things will change.” That is the view of some people in this country. Madam Speaker, what does that horrendous act have to do with the assignment of the Prime Minister? Some people think that they are related.

And I too, I saw in today’s papers, ACP Myster saying to the country, to the women in particular, that in the issues of domestic violence, you need to be careful what you do in life and do not put yourself in a situation. Because, you know, Madam Speaker, misinformation is causing people to be blaming the police for that horrendous situation. But when you look at it, as far as I could have seen, the law was followed and the police would have followed the law, but the citizen’s responsibility fell short.

Madam Speaker, I am saying this, Madam Speaker, because I remembered many years ago, I was at a public meeting, public conversation, and a matter was raised about somebody’s domestic problem in a home, and a woman called on me to do something about it. And I made the observation then that the Government’s authority stops at the front door, in some instances, and does not get into the bedroom, but as we grapple with these issues, we need to take some personal responsibility about how we behave. “Mama yo”, they nearly skewered me for giving the advice that I gave to my two daughters, be careful with how you go about your life and with whom you associate. Today, I see officer Myster saying the same thing in similar situations.

Madam Speaker, I saw my colleague from Pointe-a-Pierre, he wants details of the Atlantic LNG restructuring. Madam Speaker, how much more details can we give in this situation? We have given all the reasons why we have done it. We have given all the reasons why, if we do not do it, what is going to be the outcome. We indicated at every step of the way what progress we have made and how we have made it, and we indicated what prospect we can hold out to the country.

What does he want? What details does he want? And all of that is done against the background of the market fluctuations and vagaries, and the gas production in our country and our reducing volumes, and our need to go and look for gas elsewhere, and so on. But he had no interest in wanting to know, or being concerned that the leader that he follows, as Prime Minister of this country, had no idea what the Government's shareholding in Atlantic LNG was. He did not even know that we did not have any shareholdings in Train 2 and Train 3.

So I am saying that some of these people who are appointing themselves as spokespersons for the national interest, they are either hopelessly lost, unresearched, or just malicious. Because my colleague from Pointe-a-Pierre, every time he gets up, it is to look for some way to poke some negative at Dragon deal, at Manatee, at LNG, and does not know what he is talking about.

What details are you looking for?—as though we are hiding something and there is something that the public should know and you will make them know it. We are talking to the public at every step of the way, including, Madam Speaker, having to listen to the Opposition Leader coming here and talking about Minister Young and Prime Minister Rowley went and talked to Houston.

Madam Speaker: Prime Minister, again, we are trying to comply so—

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Thank you, Madam. My apologies, Madam.

Madam Speaker: Yes, sure.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: I am trying to use the English language but apparently, it is circumscribed in this particular way. I have to try and comply, but as I am thinking and talking, it slips—the Member for Siparia, coming here and talking about decisions that we made on gas prices in Houston caused the price of electricity to go up in this country.

Madam Speaker, I want to say it again for the nth time to my colleagues on the other side—and I hope now the five down there will believe me this time, because they are down there now. We did not—Mr. Young, the Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West, and myself, Diego Martin West—I cannot talk to myself now. We did not go to Houston to negotiate any gas prices. We went to Houston urgently because the contact and the negotiations between BP and NGC had broken down and there was no conversation taking place about a gas price that was sorely needed in a situation where the entire Point Lisas estate was at risk.

As Prime Minister, I took the responsibility, with the Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister, to go to Houston to meet the decision makers, to pull them together and to get them talking to NGC again. That is what we did. Why is that so difficult for you all to understand? It is either you are dumb or you are wicked. Coming here and talking about the raising of the electricity rate? Madam Speaker, that decision to bring them back immediately to talk resulted in a gas price being arrived at and immediately freed up—

Mr. Indarsingh: Standing Order 48(1), I would like the Prime Minister to withdraw the word “dumb”.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Continue, Prime Minister.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Point proven.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping and laughter*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Madam Speaker, that was the nature of a lot of the response to the budget. The budget drew some highlights—

[*Device goes off*]

Madam Speaker: Would the person with the offending device leave the Chamber, get their device under control and they could return? Whoever it is, kindly leave the Chamber.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Madam Speaker, I trust that I will get some injury time for these unnecessary disturbances. There are a few things that came up that I want to respond to, just to make sure that the record is straight. There are about four or five issues that I am required to respond to in my portfolio, but I will come back to that in a minute.

But I want, for the record, to deal with this statement made by my colleague from St Augustine, because it is fundamental to the politics and the belief for the next election, and that is that the UNC repealed the property tax. Madam Speaker, what do I have to do to get them to stop saying that? The challenge to the property tax was, they went to the court and it was not proceeded with. And then, Madam Speaker, the Government came to this Parliament, where some of them were present, and enacted a waiver, and the waiver was for a specific period of time. That waiver ended by intervention and English letters in this Parliament. The waiver ended and thus, the existing property tax law became force.

3.50 p.m.

That happened in 2015. So, when we came in September 2015, the following couple of weeks, 1st of October, 2015, the waiver would have died, the

waiver would have expired. So, the Property Tax Act became in full force. I want to repeat that. As a result of the position taken here by Minister Larry Howai of the UNC in this place, the waiver was being enjoyed put there by them for political reasons, "axe the tax." The axe became dull and there was no axe after September 2015. I became leader of this team, Prime Minister on the 9th of September, 2015, and from the 1st October, the first of the new fiscal year, the property tax Act came back into force as enacted by the PNM. It was never repealed. And I do not want to use the word again, because I do not want to annoy my colleague from Couva South, but it applies to St. Augustine.

Madam Speaker, all of that is meant to fool the public, because some people in his country trust them to speak the truth, but they are selling their pig in a bad market. They have a difficulty with speaking the truth. What they did they went to court and argued against the tax that I was paying since I was 17 years old, and in the court one little strand of the argument was supported in the court and resulted in the court asking the government to create a new roll. We had to go and find 200 houses individually accessed, half of the population of housing in the country, before we could enact—put the law into force. And it took the Government probably—was it 36 to 48 months to do that?—so that is what we were dealing with all the time.

We did not grant a waiver, but we are complying with the court order to create a new roll and as you created the role they created "manima" up and down about the whole question of the evaluation and the property tax, and, Madam Speaker let me just end on this note on this point. At the end of the day, this Government is levying and receiving property tax. Is it 2 per cent? Two per cent. You know, what? When they removed the waiver, you know what they were

asking to do, and they tried to do it? Was 7 per cent. They had set out to collect the tax at 7 per cent, it is now 2 per cent, but they still out there harassing the public, property tax, property tax, property tax, property tax. Mischievous underminers that you are.

Madam Speaker, the next big point that came out of the budget debate making headlines, is that the Prime Minister somehow sequestered a \$400 million for himself in his Ministry, and they used ghost buildings to do it. The Opposition Leader is a self-appointed Senior Counsel gone to a press conference after she had three and a half hours to talk to the country about the budget. Gone to a press conference to make that ridiculous statement, but I will waste no more of my time on that. I expect the Minister of Finance to deal with that.

Mr. Imbert: I will.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Going further, the Prime Minister has put \$50 million in the budget for feteing at the Prime Minister's residence. Let me just point out something to the country and use my time to do that now. Upon having the responsibility for forming a Cabinet in this country, one of the things I did was to operate a smaller Cabinet than the previous Prime Minister. This Cabinet has 23 members. Madam Speaker, our expenditure has always been frugal at the Prime Minister's residence and the Diplomatic Centre. There is a complex, a compound. As Minister for UDeCOTT, the Prime Minister has that portfolio the Urban Development Corporation.

The line Minister for the Urban Development Corporation (UDeCOTT) is a Prime Minister. And I took responsibility for using that corporation for doing a number of things, not the least of which was to bring us back into this Parliament. We were all over the country “like Ms. Howard cat”, when the Parliament was left

as a construction site for years. I took responsibility for that. UDeCOTT under my portfolio. Our legacy that was rotting on Queen's Park West, but today they are sources of pride to us. The President's House that was a garbage dump, collecting garbage by the truckload. Today, the President's House is in use. And of course, the Prime Minister's residence is not a home for battered women, it is a home to house the Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Madam Speaker, they try to make those issues, because they figure you will not know the facts. What are the facts? Who was spending money wild at the Prime Minister's residence? Who was feteing there? 2010 to 2015 when the UNC was in Government, when my friend from Siparia was in charge of Government affairs, Prime Minister's establishment operating expenses at the Diplomatic Centre and residence of the Prime Minister, \$122.6 million and add to that, \$47.08 million for events. That comes to \$170,482,000.

So, while they spent a \$170 million operating all the responsibilities of that institution up there, the residence and the Diplomatic Centre, 2015 to 2020, Prime Minister's establishment operating expenses, \$42,716,000 and as for events for that period, \$9, 435,000. So, while they spent \$122 million, we spend \$42 million, while they spent \$47 million, we spent \$9 million. So, the total was, while they spent \$170.48 million, we spent \$52.15 million. And I have to come here and listen to the Leader of the Opposition trying to mislead the country that some kind of splurging is taking place at the Prime Minister residence.

Madam Speaker, so far for the period 2020 to 2024, \$37.9 million for operating expenses and \$12 million for events, for a total of \$50 million as compared to \$170 million. I defy anyone of them or any authority anywhere to

have a different truthful expression. Madam Speaker, listen to this unusual expenditure, which we never incurred while we were there for our nine years. We have never hired an event planner to plan anything in that place. Every event we have had there was planned by the staff. And today, I want to pay particular acknowledgement to the good work being done by Ms. Wendy Rocke.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Every single event from hosting Heads of State to whatever in that place, the event planner was Wendy Rocke as part of her daily work. But here, under them, event planner fees, \$173,700 for one event, but the event was a Cabinet retreat. A Cabinet retreat at the residence there cost 173,700, they paid a planner. I would not tell you who the planner is because then you would see the whole story. I do not want to see the whole story. And then more entertainment planning fees. So, you have a planner you paid a \$173,000, but you have planning fees of \$345,000, Madam Speaker, it was so interesting that one of them—there is one situation where the event planner's fees is \$96,000, that is in another event. And this was the Venezuelan President visit, they hired an event planner. The planner to plan the event, for the show for the President for Venezuela, is \$96,000 but the show is \$35,000. The planner cost twice as much as the show.

4.00 p.m.

That is how they spent money. That is how they spend money. I do not have the time now to go into the OAS and the \$961 million. I do not have time to go into all of those things because those are other stories that are all around us, but then come in the budget debate to get a headline that the Prime Minister is taking millions to go and fete. The Minister of Finance will explain all that to you.

Travel, Madam Speaker. Travel. The Prime Minister—they want to know,

the Prime Minister is travelling. There is one from our Oropouche East. He is calling for my passport to be taken away because I am travelling too much. Madam Speaker, I have not made a trip in this country that I can not defend publicly. I know my colleague from Naparima is chastising me in here for not going to the COP meeting—

Mr. Young SC: And the UN General Assembly.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley:—and the UN General Assembly because he was familiar with the UNGA, right? As Prime Minister, I deliberately did not go to the number of things that I should have gone, and I did not miss the ones that I had to be at. You see, so, every year, every year, there are at least two CARICOM meetings. Since I became Prime Minister, I am into my year now. I have been to virtually, I think, every single CARICOM country because the meeting rotates from country to country and we meet twice a year.

I have been to Suriname, Guyana, Grenada, St. Lucia, Barbados, Antigua, Belize, all the way, because that is where CARICOM has its meetings. I want to ask my colleagues on the other side, which CARICOM meeting should I not go to? Which one? Because they have CARICOM meetings they do not go to, you know. When my colleague from Siparia was Prime Minister, there was a CARICOM meeting in Guyana where the Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago was absent. In the absence of Trinidad and Tobago, an item called the CARICOM Single Market and Economy, CSME, was taken off of the agenda in the absence of the Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago, who was busy in Tobago at Coco Reef, drinking and celebrating the UNC victory in May of 2016.

So while the country's business, the CARICOM Single Market and Economy, where all our manufacturers put their business to sell their produce, to

keep workers employed, and to earn foreign exchange, that was taken off the agenda. I had to put it back there, my first meeting in CARICOM, put it back on the agenda.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: And as a result of that, the initiative brought us here to a special CARICOM meeting at the Hilton, where CARICOM for the first time then agreed to something called the St. Ann's Accord. That is where we cement our position and secured our market. We pay into the CARICOM Development Fund for the LDCs and they agree—

Mr. Young SC: To buy our product.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley:—to buy our product in a more open and effective way. We protected our market, we protected our manufacturers, we protected our jobs by the Prime Minister standing there in reach.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: That is what Prime Ministers do. That is what a Prime Minister is supposed to do. And of course, questioning my travel. I had to go to Jamaica to sit down. I took with me the Member for St. Augustine at the time—

Mr. Young SC: Prakash Ramadhar.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley:—Prakash Ramadhar as part of the Opposition. Sat there with the Government of Jamaica, a whole half of the Cabinet, trying to prevent them from supporting a boycott of Trinidad and Tobago's goods because of the offensive language used by Trinidad and Tobago's Prime Minister. I had to go to the Chamber of Commerce in Jamaica and speak like I have not spoken before to people, asking them to respect and to support CARICOM and not ban our goods— and I coming here to talk about travel.

Madam Speaker, there are two travel items in front of me as I speak to you now. One is the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Samoa. I want to ask my colleagues on the other side, and I will sit down in case you all want to answer, just indicate. Should I or should I not go to that meeting of the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Samoa on the 22nd of this month? If you think I should not go, just indicate, I will give you time to answer. But once you agree that I should go, there are certain arrangements in place to cover the costs. So—

Madam Speaker: Prime Minister, I would like to advise you have two more minutes of ordinary time. You are entitled to 10 more minutes after that to wrap up your contribution.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Okay. So having agreed that I should go, there are certain arrangements in cost, airfare and so on, and the airfare is not cheap anywhere in the world. So what is this thing about coming to make an issue of Prime Minister travelling when you know that these are the—

Mr. Young SC: Requirements.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley:—quid pro quos and requirements for being a nation in the Commonwealth or even in the world? Madam Speaker, let me just—over and above the normal two CARICOM meetings a year, so after nine and a half years, that is over 20 meetings of the standard CARICOM meetings. So, things come up.

I also attended a meeting in Washington, which was not on the agenda, from early, and that was the Caribbean-Central American Energy Summit in Washington organized by the United States Government. I had the opportunity then to sit at that meeting with now-President Biden. That is why I knew him personally.

Madam Speaker, I also had to go to Ghana. You know why I had to go to Ghana, Madam Speaker? Because the Ghanaian President sent an emissary to Trinidad and Tobago to invite us into the Ghanaian energy industry that they were just discovering, wanting to give us the business of gas processing. The emissary came to Trinidad and for three days could not see the Prime Minister. Eventually, the then Prime Minister agreed to see him in her constituency office. When he got there to see her in the office, she was not very lucid. So, he had to go back and report to the President his experience in Trinidad and Tobago. Ghana then called in the Chinese and gave them the business. But they still wanted to talk to us, Trinidad and Tobago, so I had to go there now and recreate that contact in Ghana. Madam Speaker, subsequent to that, on two occasions, I was invited as Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago, once to be the special guest of the people of Ghana at their Independence celebration. I accepted that invitation. Who over there wants to say I should not have accepted it? And then the Asantehene, the King of the Asante, invited me to be his personal guest at his 25th anniversary, celebrating his ascension to the throne in Ghana.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: I should not have gone to that. And of course, what I have in my hand right now, this one is dated the 8th of October, which is just recently, written to me by the Prime Minister of Barbados.

The International Monetary Fund, in partnership with the Government of Barbados, is pleased to invite you in the in-person 2024 High-Level Caribbean Forum on Tuesday, December 03, 2024 in Bridgetown, Barbados. This is now sponsored by Barbados and the International Monetary Fund for discussions on matters which are obviously pertinent to Trinidad and Tobago.

The forum will involve and facilitate a dialogue on addressing the challenges relating to transitioning to the green energy. I'm talking about taking stock of macroeconomic implications and unleashing private sector investment.

And so on and so on—

Should I go or should I not go? I am asking for your permission. Coming and wasting people's time talking about Prime Minister's travel. Madam Speaker, I can account for every hour.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: I want to put on the record, I have never met an oil company executive when I was not appropriately dressed, never in my pajamas.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Madam Speaker, another big point that was made was the whole question of Government rent. Let me just put on record in this Parliament; this is my 44th year in public life. I started that—

Mrs. Haynes-Alleyne: [*Interruption*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Yes, Tabaquite, I was there before you—

Mr. Young SC: Before you were born.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley:—before you were born. [*Laughter*] I started out my political career on a public platform for the PNM in Belle Garden in Tobago. You know what the big issue was at that time? Getting rid of the Ministry of Tobago Affairs.

4.10. p.m.

Because the Ministry of Tobago Affairs was deemed to be oppressive to the people of Tobago in their quest for internal self-government and so on. And so, they wanted nothing to do with the Ministry of Tobago Affairs. The PNM lost that

election in 1980. I cut my teeth in that election. There was not a Ministry for Tobago Affairs anywhere in Tobago until the UNC came into view.

When the UNC came into view, they saw not Tobago's internal self-government as the issue, they saw an opportunity. And the opportunity they saw was to facilitate the construction of an office building in Tobago. That office building today houses the Prime Minister and CAST, Central Administration Services Tobago. They came out of the Treasury, the Government's own building, which has been there empty ever since. Empty and locked up there because they built a building with their connections, and that building was offered to the Government. It had a number of defects at the time when it was offered. They then said the defects were attended to. The Valuation Division valued the rent at \$280,000 a month. That was the Government's Valuation Division's valuation. They said, "Nah, that too low". They rented it for \$300,000 a month.

Mr. Young SC: Wow.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Between then and now, that building has been rented for upwards of \$46 million.

Mr. Young SC: Siparia, boy.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Every month, \$300,000. It is the only Bissessar in Tobago who is so lucky to get that done.

Mr. Young SC: "Roll up de tassa Bissessar."

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Tobago Bissessar—

Hon. Member: Tobago Bissessar.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley:—renting that, and while they are renting it happily and silently, the Government structure, is locked up there. "Them and their friends" in Tobago. And telling me now, about who wants self-government and who does not

want it and whatnot. I want to say to my colleagues who have now seen the light; because I have heard them speak in this Parliament like they have never spoken before. They have come out from under the yoke—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley:—of the Member for Siparia and now they are free to be decent, patriotic citizens.

Mr. Armour SC: Oh yeah!

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: You said you will support good legislation. We have a piece of legislation before the Parliament for Tobago's internal self-government coming from a committee in this House. I ask you to read it because as soon as the budget debate is over, I am going to bring it back to the Floor, and if you really believe in being patriotic, you will support what that bill supports for the people of Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: And as for my friend from—

Hon. Member: Couva North

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley:—Couva North—

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]—they are calling you friend.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley:—who is waiting to jump into this debate, I just want to advise you that when we have completed that airport in Tobago, that terminal building, it will be a very difficult place for you to operate.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Madam Speaker, the last minute that I have, I simply want to say that the Government observed: one, that the vessel—boat from China that

the former Prime Minister saw and wanted one, has now been deemed by a survey of experts to be—let me read it:

The vessel is presently unserviceable due to a multitude of defects resulting from a major equipment failure. All the systems are defective—
—because they were never meant to be what they thought it was going to be, which is an offshore patrol vessel.

Shore power system gone, main diesel generator gone, steering system gone, corroded suction piping, auxiliary machinery gone, radar gone, ship tender gone, heating ventilation gone, air conditioning gone, hull and deck equipment gone.

Who wants to go to sea in that?

Hon. Member: Send Gary—[*Inaudible*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: As a result of which, Madam Speaker, I expect that very soon the Cabinet will authorize the disposing of that, because it is down there banging against the—

Mr. Young SC: The pier.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley:—in bad weather. It is threatening to destroy the pier, so we have to sell that as scrap.

Madam Speaker, finally, I want to say that we are not only concerned about the equipment, we are concerned about the personnel. The Cabinet recently took a decision to change the law to allow the pension regulations amendment to come into force so that the CDS can do certain things for compassionate treatment of members of the Defence Force, which is those persons who are required to have 20 years before they get a pension.

Very frequently you have persons with 19 years and some days or 18.5 years

and so on, and they have to leave at the age of 45 without a pension. I understand that—I am hearing from my friends on the other side that they will increase the service age to 65. We are saying, that is not what you need to do. We have done what had to be done. We have authorized the CDS to give the required number of days of service so as to let such persons qualify at the 20-year mark so they can leave the Defence Force with a pension.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Madam Speaker—

Mr. Deyalsingh: You have one more minute.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley:—those are the kinds of things that we have done. I have a whole lot more to say, but I do not have a lot more time in here. I am just saying to you that I have heard my colleague from Mayaro speak about his swan song. I am now in my 10th year as Prime Minister. I too may be a swan, but ladies and gentlemen, colleagues in this House, as long as I can leave here having done the best for the people of Trinidad and Tobago, it does not matter when I leave—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley:—because I will leave with my head held high. And I hope that when I leave here I can be proud to say that I served with certain people and I hope that they do not have to say, “If you want to find them, you have to look where the average citizen does not live”.

Madam Speaker, it has been a pleasure working with you as Parliamentary Speaker. I do not know how much longer I will have in this Parliament but I have done my duty and I have kept the course. I have run the race and I look forward, not for a pot of gold, but for my family at the end of this rainbow. I thank you Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Couva North.

Mr. Ravi Ratiram (*Couva North*): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram:—for recognizing me and affording me the opportunity to participate in this debate for the financial year 2025, presented—

Hon. Members: [*Continuous desk pounding and crosstalk*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: Thank you.

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]—sitting down here.

Mr. R. Ratiram: Thank you, Madam Speaker—

Hon. Member: “Yuh thanking de wrong people.”

Mr. R. Ratiram:—and thank you most kindly for allowing me to participate in this budget debate for the financial year of 2025.

Hon. Members: Run! [*Inaudible*]

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping and crosstalk*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: I also want to take this opportunity to—

Madam Speaker: Just one minute. I really would like to hear the Member for Couva North. Member, proceed.

Mr. R. Ratiram: Thank you most kindly once more, Madam Speaker. As I begin, I want to take this opportunity to congratulate the Leader of the Opposition, the hon. Member for Siparia—

Hon. Members: Who is here now.

Mr. R. Ratiram:—for such a thorough, comprehensive and insightful budget response—who is here in the Chamber doing the people’s work, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: I also want to take a moment to thank my staff, my research team, those who would have accompanied me on the various site visits, my councillors, aldermen, guest speakers and everyone who came forward and contributed to our pre-budget consultation in the constituency of Couva North, but also for the citizens that came and participated in the several pre-budget consultations that were held in all constituencies, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: Because you see, Madam Speaker, we on this side are led by a visionary and a compassionate leader—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram:—who understands that when we are to speak in this august Chamber, Madam Speaker, we are not just to peddle our personal views, but we are here to be a voice for the voiceless—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram:—to stand in the gap in the defence of that 99 per cent of the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago that this Government failed to address the concerns, the issues, and the challenges affecting them.

4.20 p.m.

Madam Speaker, I also want to take this opportunity to applaud all my colleagues on this side who would have previously contributed—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram:—towards this budget debate, and they would have strategically, brilliantly dismantled this dumb budget—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram:—this irresponsible budget, Madam Speaker, that was presented by this Minister of Finance.

Madam Speaker, before I go into my substantive contribution, I want to take a moment—

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: I want to take a moment, Madam Speaker, to respond to the previous speaker, the hon. Prime Minister, who I really thought, Madam Speaker, was going to come to this House to speak about the issues affecting the citizens of this country—

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Mr. R. Ratiram:—the real issues, Madam—

Madam Speaker: You know, usually the Member for Couva North could control the Chamber when he is speaking. I am having a difficulty in hearing him. All right? So let us give him the support by remaining here in silence and listening. Member for Couva North.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: Thank you most kindly, Madam Speaker. As I continue with my contribution, Madam Speaker, I was hoping that the Prime Minister would have utilized his time here to account to the population, to account and tell us, give us some accountability of that \$3 billion that has been unaccounted for.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: Madam Speaker, I thought this hon. Prime Minister was going to utilize his time to roll out the possible plans that he has to save this economy that is on the brink of devastation, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: Madam Speaker, I thought this Prime Minister was going to come in this august Chamber and tell the country some of the issues and some of the plans that he and his regime has for the next five years, Madam Speaker. But just like in 2015 and just like in 2020, here we are on the brink of 2025, and this PNM Administration clearly has no plans to run this country and to govern the country.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: Madam Speaker, and they cannot handle the truth. They cannot handle being exposed, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: That is why every one of them on the other side, they ran—they ducked and they ran because they know Couva North was coming to deal with the issues and respond to the hon. Prime Minister.

Madam Speaker, the hon. Prime Minister, he came here today to tell us—to try and paint a picture of how well the economy is, and how rosy the economy is, Madam Speaker. However just a few days ago, he was telling the country to buckle up until 2027. He said, “It will be a rough ride,” just a few days—is it that the Prime Minister is flip-flopping?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: Does the Prime Minister need to be checked out? Because something clearly seems to be wrong, Madam Speaker. It was just a few days ago, he was talking about doom and gloom. Madam Speaker, I want to take a moment to present to you the facts that the Prime Minister failed to present when he tried to speak on economy—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram:—and I am going to use—I would not show it here, because I did not seek your permission before, but I am going to read from the *Review of the Economy 2024*, page 16:

“The Ministry of Finance estimates Nominal GDP to fall to \$184,770.1 million in 2023. The lower-than-initially estimated 2023 Nominal GDP was due to subdued energy prices coupled with a lower inflation rate.”

Madam Speaker, this *Review of the Economy* continues in pages 17, and hear what is printed here in this book, presented by the Ministry of Finance:

“...Ministry now anticipates Nominal GDP to expand to \$186,269.4 million in calendar 2024.”

So because he is hearing of the expansion in 2024, he is thinking that it is going to increase. But the document continues, it states:

“In fiscal year terms, Nominal GDP is expected to be around \$185, 894.6 million, marginally lower than the fiscal year estimate for 2023 of \$189,323.8 million.”

Madam Speaker, the Prime Minister came here and tried to play smart with foolishness.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: The economy, Madam Speaker, continues to crumble under the PNM Administration, Madam Speaker. People continue to suffer on a daily basis.

Madam Speaker, the hon. Prime Minister came and he pleaded for the support from some of those on this side to treat with legislation, and he said that he was going to come to ban assault firearMs. Madam Speaker, but with less than two minutes, my colleague here, who shadows national security—I want to congratulate the excellent job he is doing, the MP for Barataria/San Juan—

Appropriation (Financial Year 2025)
Bill, 2024
Mr. Ratiram (cont'd)

2024.10.10

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram:—he was able to provide me with the information. According to the *Guardian*, on 20 April, 2023:

“Firearms expert”—Mr. Barnes—“says assault weapons already banned in...”—Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: You know, when the Prime Minister was presenting that dumb statement, colleagues on this side was trying to guide him—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram:—and show him the light, but he just seemed hell-bent on coming to this Parliament with dumb statements, after dumb statements, after dumb statements.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: Madam Speaker, he went on to speak about the Government’s authority stops at the front door and does not get into your bedroom. Well, I would not say much about this, Madam Speaker, because the Prime Minister has ventilated that, where in his response to domestic violence crime, serious crime in Trinidad and Tobago, serious murder in this country, real issues where over 4,500 persons have been murdered in this country, his response to the women of Trinidad and Tobago was to, choose your man wisely? And now he is coming to say that the Government’s authority stops at the front door?

Madam Speaker, in my constituency of Couva North—may his soul rest in peace—young Mr. Nandlal was shot inside his bedroom, trying to protect his wife; right in my constituency. I continue to express my condolences to the Nandlal family. Good people, law-abiding citizens, role models in our society had to be

victims of crime inside their bedroom. This is why, Madam Speaker, our Leader, has made it clear that the Government's authority is not going to stop by the doorway, the Government's authority is going to help citizens outside of their homes and inside of their homes—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram:—with stand-your-ground legislation, where if an intruder comes into your home, they come into your bedroom, the law will protect your family—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram:—the law will protect the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, Madam Speaker. So this dumb sort of statement that the Prime Minister wants to come here with today, Madam Speaker, we are not going to fall for that; we are not going to fall for that.

He sat here and—well, he presented—the hon. Prime Minister presented here, Madam Speaker, having issues with the Member of Parliament for Pointe-a-Pierre, who shadows the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries—and I want to congratulate the MP for Pointe-a-Pierre—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram:—on that dragon blast contribution he gave this Parliament. I use this opportunity, Madam Speaker, to wish best greetings to my colleague, the MP for Pointe-a-Pierre, and members of the Chinese community on this day of Double Ten.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: We wish them all the best.

Madam Speaker, the Prime Minister came and spoke about the rising electricity rates, when the Leader of the Opposition exposed this Government for

their possible intention, where electricity rates—where the cost of electricity can increase, and the Member for Princes Town as well—my colleague, the Member for Princes Town, he also exposed this Administration, playing smart with foolishness, of having intention of increasing utility rates.

4.30 p.m.

Madam Speaker, when the Prime Minister started speaking on the rising of electricity rates, you know what transpired? Some circus music went off, and a Member was asked to walk out the Chamber, because it seems as though they were joking at him on this side. They were joking at the hon. Prime Minister. And I now understand why he had to tell Tobago West, tonight was only for good behaviour. But it looked like he did not tell the hon. Member, before the Prime Minister came into the House for this Sitting, that the Sitting should be for good behaviour.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: Yes. Madam Speaker, the hon. Prime Minister, next went to speak about property tax, what the hon. Prime Minister, himself referred to as the dreaded property tax. Madam Speaker, the Prime Minister spoke about a waiver, which ended at the end of the People's Partnership's term in office, a waiver on property tax. This is the same Prime Minister I recall, who had in one point in time opposed his leader, on this issue of property tax. This is the same Prime Minister, who clearly stated on *Hansard* that he does not support a single dollar increase, or anything like that. A \$100 was too much—

Hon. Member: Correct.

Mr. R. Ratiram:—for a lot of people. However, Madam Speaker, he spoke about the waiver which expired at the end of the term of the People's Partnership. Could a new waiver not be introduced? Could an extension of the waiver not be introduced? Could we not continue to extend that waiver, because we understand the hardship of the population of Trinidad and Tobago, Madam Speaker?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: Madam Speaker, I want to put on the record that under the leadership of the Member for Siparia, the People's Partnership Administration, did not collect a single cent in property tax for five years.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: The hon. Prime Minister, came to tell this Parliament and to tell the country that the Government is levying and collecting property tax at 2 per cent, but the People's Partnership, wanted to collect at 7 per cent. How the Prime Minister will come with such a dumb statement? Because the hon. Prime Minister knows for five years, the People's Partnership, did not collect any property tax.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: Well, I recognize on the issue of the \$400 million for himself—that is the hon. Prime Minister, the increase in the allocation. The Prime Minister himself, he had nothing to say. The Prime Minister could not respond to the allegations raised—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram:—by the hon. Member for Siparia, Madam Speaker—had nothing to say, when it is, we cannot get schools completed in the country. When it is we cannot get a simple pre-school—Waterloo Early Childhood Centre, because the Minister of Education, talking about funding, and we do not have the

funding. But here we see, Prime Minister increased allocating an additional \$400 million to himself. Madam Speaker, the Prime Minister went into \$50 million feteing. A \$50 million expense—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram:—for feteing, Madam Speaker. You know what he did? He went about blaming, being the Minister for UDeCOTT, blaming the UNC, blaming how much the People's Partnership spent, when the People's Partnership did not collect a cent in additional taxes, or anything like that. He went about blaming UDeCOTT, blaming People's Partnership, blaming the Member for Siparia, Madam Speaker. When at this point in time, this country has to ensure that we get value for money being spent. When we come here to deal with a budget, where agriculture has been cut—agriculture has been cut by more than \$200 million, Madam Speaker, Agriculture is experiencing a cut—and I will come to that just now. Because of the fact that the Minister of Finance wants to ensure that he prioritizes his spending—an additional \$50 million, increase you know, Madam Speaker. An increase in the allocation from less than \$1 million to more than \$50 million to fete.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: Madam Speaker, is it to fete, or is it for election bribe? What is it?

Madam Speaker: That is imputing improper motives, withdraw that, please.

Mr. R. Ratiram: I withdraw, and I ask: Is it an election incentive that is now going to be considered—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram:—that the Prime Minister will be responsible for, Madam Speaker? The Prime Minister—well he could not say anything about my colleague, the Member for Oropouche East, which such a powerful contribution by the lion for Oropouche East, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: The Prime Minister—the only thing that he have could have responded to the Member from Oropouche East, is that the Member for Oropouche East is calling for the passport to be taken away. Madam Speaker, we have no issues with the hon. Prime Minister traveling. We have no issues whatsoever. And I have consulted my leader who told me the same.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: My leader endorsed that statement, Madam Speaker. However, what we have an issue with, Madam Speaker, is a Prime Minister travelled 390 days, and bought back nothing to this country.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: No jobs, no investment, nothing for the people, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Member: He has a rich—he has ah [*Inaudible*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: Well, I am coming to that just now. Because the Prime Minister spoke about his multiple destinations where he would have enjoyed certain—well we saw pictures where the Prime Minister would have enjoyed certain golf courses. However, he went on—the hon. Prime Minister indicated that he had to travel to Ghana. All well and good. And being a guest and so forth, at Ghana and representing the country at Ghana. We are okay with that. Some of us might have given the thumbs up and liked the photo and stuff on the socials.

However, Madam Speaker, when the hon. Prime Minister returned from Ghana, he made a big announcement, that we were going to get yam coming from Ghana. Madam Speaker, the country is still waiting. Where is the yam from Ghana that the Prime Minister once promised? No yam. It is just like the plywood factory. No plywood factory. And my colleague from Oropouche East will say more of that on the pavement.

Madam Speaker, it is very sad. It is very, very sad, when it is, a Prime Minister, who has the opportunity to come in this august Chamber and present the plans, policies and programmes for the people of Trinidad and Tobago, could waste 55 minutes of parliamentary time and deliver an absolutely dumb statement.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: In his conclusion, he said that he has a lot to say, but his time was limited. I want to tell the Prime Minister that his time is limited. And that airport that he wants to speak about in Tobago, which this Administration may not be able to complete, that when we on this side complete the ANR Robinson Airport—a project that would had been started from since the People's Partnership Administration.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: Nine years and they have not completed that project in Tobago—that when we return to office, Madam Speaker, we on this side will complete that project for the people of Tobago, and a lot of his friends, “Bullet” and others, who he enjoyed the company off, those friends of his, who he wanted to enjoy that 50 million for entertainment, are not going to also be able, as he said, to frequent that airport.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: Madam Speaker, I have with me here, a file that was passed by my senior, the MP for Oropouche East. A red file, Madam Speaker, I will not display this red file, but I will come to that in a short while, as I rebut some of the misleading and dumb statements said from on the other side.

However, Madam Speaker, I want to start with education. And I want to deal with some the statements presented by the hon. Minister of Education. And from the onset, I once more want to plead with the hon. Minister, on behalf of the constituents of Couva North, to please once more, open the Waterloo Early Childhood Centre. A facility that was completed, 100 per cent completed by the People's Partnership, under the leadership of the hon. Member for Siparia, because the Member understood the importance of investing into children.

4.40 p.m.

The hon. Member for Siparia understood the importance of that early beginning, and we here in Trinidad and Tobago, Madam Speaker, during that period of time, we were recognized by the United Nations for having universal early childhood education.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: Madam Speaker, from the preschool, I want to move into the primary school and what is happening in our primary schools, Madam Speaker, it is really sad. On the 20th of March, a media release from the Office of the Leader of the Opposition—and I want to quote where the Leader of the Opposition indicated, celebrating SEA students' achievements amidst educational challenges, the Member for Siparia stated:

Despite the significant challenges and mismanagement within the education sector by the current incompetent PNM Government, these children have

demonstrated an unwavering commitment to their education and each of them deserve to be proud of their achievement regardless of their results.

The Leader of the Opposition continues:

It is important to reflect on the statically performance of students over the years to understand the impact of educational policy and good governance. Under the previous administration that I led—and that is the hon. Member for Siparia—the SEA results were notably higher, with 91 per cent of students scoring 50 per cent or above and 14 per cent achieving over 90 per cent. This period saw significant investment and reform in education and yielded positive outcomes.

I want to congratulate the Member for Siparia for such wonderful performance during that time.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: Madam Speaker, however, moving from there and fast-forwarding to where we are today, I want to share with you some statistics of what is happening at the primary school level. In 2015, 14.1 per cent scored above 90 per cent, 91 per cent scored above 50 per cent, and only 1.1 per cent scored below 30 per cent. Madam Speaker, in 2016, above 90, we fell from 14 down to 10, 6, 3, 0, 1, 3, 0.7, 2.1. In 2024, Madam Speaker, we fell from 14.1 per cent down to 1.42 per cent of persons graduating over 90. We fell from 91 per cent, scoring above 50, down to 57.9 per cent, and we increased from those below 30 per cent; from 1.1 we increased up to 14.39 per cent.

Madam Speaker, this education Ministry is failing our children. It is seriously failing our children. We have fell from 91 per cent down to 57 per cent. That would have never happened under the prime ministership of the Member for

Siparia.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: She would have fired that Minister of Education forthwith. Madam Speaker, continuing with education, I want to go to the SSIP 2025, Chapter I, page 36:

“The MOE estimated a total of twenty-five thousand, nine hundred and eighty-nine (25,989) students were enrolled in tertiary education institutions...

Fiscal 2024’s estimation reflects a consecutive year of decline in tertiary education enrolment and...—represents—“...a decrease of 5.3 per cent or one thousand four hundred and...”—sixty-four—“...students.”—less 1,464 students.

Similarly, in 2023, the students’ enrollment was an estimated 27,450, a decline of 8.3 per cent from 2022, a total of 29,964 tertiary. So, Madam Speaker, over the last few years, we have consistently been falling in the number of our students participating at tertiary education, falling from 29.96—and it was a lot more than that, Madam Speaker, but that is just the last two years I am sharing with you—from 29,000 down to 25,000.

Madam Speaker, when we look at the GATE Programme, they have basically closed the gate on the students. They have shut down the GATE on our students. It is extremely difficult for students to access tertiary education and continue further studies, their masters, their MPhil, their PhD. I do not know what it is this Government has against education, Madam Speaker. When we look at GATE, as at June 2015, a total of 59 persons received funding for that period, 2010 to 2015. That is an annual average for that five-year period, 2010 to 2015, of

11,921 persons.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: Madam Speaker, when we compare that to during this regime's term in office, over the last few years, from 2016 to 2024, it has fallen from 11,921 persons, down to 9,293. Again, less students are able to access GATE. The sad thing, Madam Speaker, these students now have to borrow. They have to beg. They have to hold barbeque, fundraiser. The family have to "chip up" and contribute to send them for university education. And, you know the sad thing, Madam Speaker, when they come out of school, they cannot find jobs in our society. They cannot find jobs, Madam Speaker.

I will go to the unemployment rate, because the unemployment rate in this country, Madam Speaker, is a serious issue. I want to read here in the last—this year:

In—"the first quarter of 2024. The unemployment rate..."—in Trinidad and Tobago increased to—"...5.4 percent..."
—compared to 4.1 per cent in the fourth quarter of 2023 and 4.9 per cent in the first quarter of 2023. The size of labour force fell again by 10,100 persons during the first three months of the calendar year. Only in the first three months of the calendar year of 2024 it has fallen by a further 10,100 persons.

Madam Speaker, since this Government has come into office, Madam Speaker, over 60,000 have lost their jobs.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: Madam Speaker, during the period of 2010 to 2015, under the most compassionate Prime Minister that this country has ever had, there was opportunities being created where over 55,000 young persons were able to get

jobs.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: New jobs, Madam Speaker. I will go into how we intend to create new jobs and new opportunities as we go forward, Madam Speaker, because you hear the poem and the riddle, and the motto and the theme of their presentation is, “Where the revenue going to come from”? They are bankrupt of ideas on that side, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: But I will tell you where the revenue is going to come from, and I will present to you, Madam Speaker, of where we expect to get that revenue. But I just want to highlight, before I move off the Ministry of Education, the HYPE Programme for the young people in this country.

In 2015, Madam Speaker, we had 771 young persons, according to page 132 of the SSIP document for 2016. We had 771 benefiting under HYPE. You know, in 2024, that same programme, how much, that has fallen to?—206, and they want to talk about “they” helping young people in this country. Madam Speaker, the allocation towards that programme in 2014 was \$42,000,873 last year, 2023. The Actual expenditure for that programme was \$13 million, falling from \$42 million, down to \$13 million, Madam Speaker. When we go to the MuST Programme, the MuST Programme, under the leadership of the Member for Siparia in the year 2015, we had 3,210, according to page 186 of the SSIP book. In 2024, page 65 of the SSIP book, only 207 trainees enrolled.

4.50 p.m.

The Actual expenditure for 2014, Madam Speaker, was \$55 million, whereas the Actual expenditure for 2023, from \$55 million, that MuST Programme fell to

\$12 million. Madam Speaker, when we are talking about helping young people and the HELP loan in the Ministry of Education, Madam Speaker, in 2014 that programme's Actual expenditure was \$31 million. According to the SSIP 2025, page 192, in 2023 the Actual expenditure was \$3,091,520. So, we have fallen from \$31 million down to \$3 million. The number of beneficiaries in 2015 was 2,233 and the number of beneficiaries for this same programme in 2024, 525, falling from 2,200 down to 5,200, Madam Speaker, and they want to come and talk about helping youths and helping young people?

Madam Speaker, Trinidad and Tobago was once governed by a visionary Prime Minister who invested into the people and who invested into the youth of our country, Madam Speaker, because we on this side, under the leadership of the Member for Siparia, we recognize that the most important resource of any nation is the resource of human resource, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: Investing into our people and investing into our youth, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, I have with me here a temporary temporary file.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter and crosstalk*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: I have a temporary file here, Madam Speaker.

Mr. Hosein: But put it in permanent form—[*Inaudible*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: I want to highlight some of the erroneous and misleading statements made by the Member for La Horquetta/Talparo. Madam Speaker, the Member for La Horquetta/Talparo, with respect to the 100 schools that the Member spoke about, I believe my colleague from Couva South would have responded for that, and so too would my other colleague, the legend, the hon. Dr.

Tim Gopeesingh—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram:—would have stood in this House also, and called out all. I want to correct him, it is not 100 schools; it is 106 schools.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: It is 106 schools, Madam Speaker. So with respect to the programme, I will go into the Tucker Valley—Madam Speaker, the Member for La Horquetta/Talparo really came here and just made a bunch of dumb statements.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: I do not really have much more to say to him, other than, Madam Speaker—and I will deal with the youth in agriculture programme shortly because I visited sites myself and I had a first-hand view. I also want to deal with the CCC programme; Civilian Conservation Corps Programme, which happens to fall under the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service. You see, Madam Speaker, this was a programme where in 2015, we would have had approximately 2,400 trainees registered under the CCC, do you know how much, according to page 126 of the SSIP book for 2025, have registered trainees? Madam Speaker, 921. This programme has fallen from 2,400 down to 900. In 2015, Madam Speaker, the programme was well funded with \$54 million. However, in 2023, where we have only 863, it received \$41 million. We have to do some further investigation and look into how it is—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram:—that \$41 million has actually been spent, Madam Speaker, and we have to ask the question “where de money gone”? Because a lot less are benefiting from this programme but it is almost close to the same amount being

allocated, so we have to look at it.

I want to deal with YTEPP, Madam Speaker. I would have benefited from YTEPP back in the day. Before I did engineering, I did the programme down at the Fyzabad Composite School—it was called at that time. The YTEPP programme would have provided great opportunities and my good friend, my colleague, the MP for Fyzabad would have also served the good people of Fyzabad as a teacher at that school, Fyzabad Composite. Madam Speaker, the YTEPP programme would have benefited thousands and thousands of citizens of this country, who can go outside and do a little trade, set up a small business. Madam Speaker, this was a programme that was once invested heavily in, by the Government of Trinidad and Tobago. The Government of the People's Partnership in 2015 invested \$110,000 into YTEPP, Madam Speaker. We had a total, from 2010 to 2015, 17,928 trainees benefiting from YTEPP, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, do you know what has that happened to this programme under this Ministry of Education—it is still under the Ministry of Education? That programme, the number of trainees has fallen from 2,300 down to 1,500, and funding for that programme, Madam Speaker, from \$110 million has now been cut down to \$41 million; cut YTEPP down to \$41 million and increased the Prime Minister's entertainment budget from less than \$1 million to \$50 million.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: “Da’ is where de money going.”

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: That is where “de money going”, Madam Speaker. So, Madam Speaker, it seems as though—I heard one of the Members on that side speaking about soca, it seems as though on that side it is only fete, after fete, after fete, after

fete. That is what this budget is about for the hon. Prime Minister.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: This budget seems to be a “fete budget” for the Prime Minister’s office.

Madam Speaker, I want to take a moment, before I go into the consultation report from the constituency and treat with the budget itself, Madam Speaker, because you see, this budget that was delivered by the Minister of Finance, Madam Speaker, appears to be one of the most—I already called it a dumb budget but the title of this budget Madam Speaker, seems to be very duplicitous.

Hon. Members: “Ahhh.”

Mr. R. Ratiram: A duplicitous title, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: Because it is saying “Steadfast and Resolute - Forging Pathways to Prosperity”—“forging pathways to prosperity”, Madam Speaker. I cannot help but ask the hon. Minister, to please tell us, in your wind-up, forging pathways to prosperity for who? Pathways to prosperity surely cannot be for those who have been recusing themselves from Cabinet—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram:—because they, their friends, their families and financiers were financially benefiting from “pathways to prosperity”. It cannot be for them. No, no, no, no, no.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: No, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, “forging pathways to prosperity” surely cannot be for the 99 per cent of our citizens whose quality of life has been deteriorating over the decade of destruction that they have been

experiencing under this uncaring Administration, Madam Speaker. It cannot be for that 99 per cent. Madam Speaker, today I stand with my leader, the Member for Siparia and my colleagues on this side as we stand in the gap, in defence of that 99 per cent of our citizens.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: As we dissect this budget, Madam Speaker, we cannot overlook the landscape that this Government has devastated during their tenure in office.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: What was once a thriving environment of opportunity and hope under the previous People's Partnership Administration, led by the hon. Member for Siparia, has tragically devolved into an intricate web of despair across all societies of our country, Madam Speaker. This Administration has paved a perilous path, leading to record unemployment, soaring inflation and a declining GDP, a trifecta that has decimated the livelihoods of thousands in this country, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, this budget presented, fails to address these critical issues and instead it offers a superficial facade, neglecting the cries of a populace yearning for genuine change.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: Madam Speaker, as our citizens struggle to make ends meet, to feed their families, not knowing where that next meal is going to come from, and to dream of a brighter tomorrow, Madam Speaker, the Government seems oblivious, clinging stubbornly to the outdated principles and policies—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*].

Mr. R. Ratiram:—that have only served to penalize, to tax and to oppress, rather than to uplift the citizens of our country Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

5.00 p.m.

Mr. R. Ratiram: Our citizens are not merely dissatisfied with the Government's budgetary blueprint, they are disillusioned with years of broken promises, repeated year, after year, after year by this regime, Madam Speaker.

And, Madam Speaker, I want to go into some of those broken promises of this Administration. You see, Madam Speaker—

Madam Speaker: Member, you have two more minutes of ordinary time. You are entitled to 10 more minutes after that. Okay?

Mr. R. Ratiram: Thank you most kindly.

Madam Speaker: Sure.

Mr. R. Ratiram: Thank you most kindly, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: Madam Speaker, unfortunately, I did not get the opportunity to use this red folder. However, I will surely make good use of it on the Sunday morning press briefing, if am allowed the opportunity, or we will meet on the pavement and we will deal with it accordingly. Madam Speaker, I want to highlight the underutilization of the allocation, or the overbudgeting and the underspending of this Administration. Because you see, I am going to present the issue related to the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries and its budgetary allocation, and to show how little this Government really values this sector.

Madam Speaker, this Government promised to improve agriculture previously, but in truth and in fact, Madam Speaker, this is what we have seen happening to the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries: In 2018, allocated \$45 million for the *Development Programme*, but only \$21 million was utilized. In

2019, \$70 million was allocated for their *Development Programme*, but only \$8.4 million was utilized, less than 12 per cent. In 2020, \$64 million was allocated, but only \$22 million was utilized. Similarly, in 2021, \$49 million allocated, \$14 million utilized. In 2022, \$68 million allocated, \$24 million being utilized.

In 2023, Madam Speaker, they allocated \$110 million to the *Development Programme* of agriculture, but when we drilled down in the books—they say, “The devil is the details,” and when we looked for what was really happening, only \$25 million was utilized, Madam Speaker. We do not know what the actual figure for 2024 is, but based on the trend that we have seen, we expect nothing different. In 2025, the *Development Programme* is allocated \$73 million, but based on this Government’s history, we expect little or nothing to be done for this upcoming fiscal period, Madam Speaker.

In contrast to this, however, Madam Speaker, it would be remiss of me if I do not point out that in 2015, under the leadership of the Member for Siparia, this same *Development Programme* received—the actual utilization was—\$139 million was utilized in agriculture.

[MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Compare that: \$139 million being utilized in 2015, whereas in 2023, only \$25 million; less than 25 per cent, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because that was the last time that this country ever saw real investment under agriculture—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram:—and a government who ensured that there was food security here in Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, there have been several promises made but because time is of the essence, I will move ahead into summarizing the broken promises.

And Mr. Deputy Speaker, this Government has delivered a decade of destruction, filled with broken promises—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram:—and empty rhetoric. Year after year, they have given false hope and neglected the agriculture sector, leaving our farmers in despair. What should have been a time of progress, as instead become a lost decade under this Government, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Despite the claims of investment in agriculture by this irresponsible Government, the agriculture sector has now seen a reduction of \$258 million in its budgetary allocation, compared to last year's budget, Mr. Deputy Speaker. That means from 2.4 of the national budget last year, agriculture now receives only 2 per cent for fiscal 2025.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, comparing that to our neighbour in Guyana, under the responsible leadership of His Excellency President Irfaan Ali, this year, agriculture received GY \$95.7 billion out of GY \$141.6 trillion. Mr. Deputy Speaker, that represents 8.4 per cent of Guyana's national budget being invested into agriculture. That is a country and a government who is serious about agriculture and who really wants to contribute to food security of CARICOM, Mr. Deputy Speaker, not like what we are receiving here from this irresponsible Administration.

When we look at our food import bill, Mr. Deputy Speaker, our food import bill has increased from \$5 billion to \$7.3 billion, to \$ 7.2 billion, Mr. Deputy Speaker. And taking a little note from what the President of Agricultural Society of Trinidad and Tobago would have said in the media, Mr. Daryl Rampersad, he said, a target of reducing the food import bill by 25 per cent, by 2025, is clearly unrealistic, and it is a goal that cannot be met.

The hon. Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries—and I took notes. I

am not seeing my notes now. But I took some very copious notes, I am not sure where those notes are but that is okay, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The hon. Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries spoke about the Food Security and Food Prices Committee. This Government's Food Security and Food Prices Committee seems like another election gimmick, another recycled idea from previous failed policies—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram:—like the Agriculture Multi-disciplinary Voluntary Advisory Committee, Mr. Deputy Speaker. It is concerning that this committee does not even include any farmers on this committee. No farmers on this committee, you know, but they want to treat with food security and so forth, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to move on swiftly to that Agri-Expo, that pappy-show that was held outside there. Because, you see, the farmers are calling that Agri-Expo pappy-show as “ah big people party” because the farmers were left out. The farmers who applied to be part of this Agri-Expo were left out, when only big companies were allowed, “big boys” were allowed, or people that the PNM Administration is prospecting to become supporters of theirs. They only allowed certain persons in that expo, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Deputy Speaker, \$20 million and more invested into “big people party”. That is why we say this budget represents “fete, after fete, after fete, after fete” for this Prime Minister and his regime.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: While they boast about the success in their farm to table programme that they claim to be a success, in 2024, \$479 million worth of vegetables and tubers were still imported, while our country's production has

fallen by 22.9 per cent.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to swiftly run into that YAHP programme, that Youth Agricultural Homestead Programme. Because you see, just last week, I received a video of a location in Tucker Valley. It was a nice 3-D fence, with a banner on the fence, with the Shade and youth in agriculture and stuff on that banner. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I believe it was two months ago, where the Prime Minister himself would have gone and cut a ribbon for that Youth Agricultural Homestead Programme there in Tucker Valley. They had beds well tilled, well moulded and they had young people claiming that they were going to teach them about seedlings in the open, and how agriculture—and greenhouses and so forth. Two months have passed, day has followed night, and you know what has happened, Mr. Deputy Speaker? That area now is overgrown with bush; bush up to “yuh” waist. And I will place the video on my page so that the farmers can see, and the youths can see how this Government cannot be trusted, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

They continuously attempt to hoodwink and mislead and fool the population with their dumb PNM propaganda, Mr. Deputy Speaker—

5.10 p.m.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram:—but I will have more to say on that on the pavement. I will say more of that, Mr. Deputy Speaker. So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I went on a trip to Marper Farms to see for myself what was happening at Marper Farms, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because after Marper Farms being closed for many years, it took a People’s Partnership Administration to reactivate Marper Farms, to invest into

Marper Farms, Mr. Deputy Speaker. What was reopened in 2014 under the leadership of the Member for Siparia with over 50,000 citrus trees and so on—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram:—over 50,000 citrus trees, now today, Mr. Deputy Speaker, has only like 100 plants—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, you have about two more minutes.

Mr. R. Ratiram: Thank you very much. Marper Farms destroyed by this Administration, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Fisheries, we have been pleading with them to address the issues affecting the fisherfolk, we have been pleading with them. So the issues concerning fisheries have remained the same, it is just that their response also remains the same. Nothing. They have done nothing. The Prime Minister two years go spoke about the fuel rebate. We have been speaking about the fuel rebate, up to now no action by this Government—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram:—to treat with the issues affecting the fisherfolk. Fishermen continue to be risking their lives. The Member for Oropouche East spoke about how many vessels. They seem to have a fetish with vessels on that side, when the reality of it is that the vessels they would have invested in, they are all parked up there, and there are no vessels protecting our borders, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Fishermen continue to suffer.

Farmers continue to suffer, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I met with the St. Lucille farmers group. I met with the Carlsen Field farmers group. I met with the Felicity and Petersfield, the exchange farmers group. I met with farmers groups across the length and breadth of this country, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I met with farmers across the country, and the issues are all the same. Issues of unkempt water courses.

Issues of flooding. Issues of praedial larceny. Issues of increased prices for input factors into the agriculture sector, problems with getting subsidies, Mr. Deputy Speaker, problems with land tenure. Mr. Deputy Speaker, if we have to summarize what this budget has been all about, this budget, Mr. Deputy Speaker, has been one of the “most dumb” budgets the people of Trinidad and Tobago have ever received.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: When we heard the contribution coming from the hon. Prime Minister, Mr. Deputy Speaker, it appears as though this Prime Minister will go down in the history as one of the “most dumb” Prime Ministers the people of Trinidad and Tobago has ever had.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I recognize the hon. Minister of Finance.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert): Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Let me wait on Madam Speaker.

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Madam Speaker: Minister of Finance.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I am not sure why the Leader of the Opposition has left the House. I hope it is a bathroom break, but—what happen?

Madam Speaker: No. Let us do not go down that road. Okay? So, you know, I really, you know, want us to try and lift this to another place. Alright?

Hon. C. Imbert: I am sorry, Madam Speaker. I apologize. I was thinking of the

only logical reason, but I apologize. I apologize. So it is unfortunate, Madam Speaker, that the Leader of the Opposition is not present however, we have the benefit in this Parliament now for many years of a live televised broadcast. So whether the Leader of the Opposition is present or not that is irrelevant in terms of the information that the public will receive during this wrapping up. I had someone to go through the response of the Leader of the Opposition to the budget statement and to write for me the most egregious untruths, and the most ridiculous, absurd statements made by the Member for Siparia. Let me deal with—yes, several, many pages, but let me deal with the most ridiculous one.

The Member for Siparia said that in the *Draft Estimates of Expenditure* the Vote for entertainment for the Office of the Prime Minister was allocated \$30 million, and that the Vote for Hosting of Functions was allocated \$20 million and the Member for Siparia added those two numbers together to get \$50 million, and began a tirade about \$50 million for fete repeated by all her subordinates on the other side, and gleefully carried by certain media houses who seem to have this habit of just repeating whatever nonsense is uttered by persons opposite.

So having heard that and being aware of the facts, being aware that the Urban Development Corporation had since 2016 been covering the expenses at the Prime Minister's residence at the Diplomatic Centre and the expenses for the establishment at the Office of the Prime Minister, and for functions and conferences and seminars and so on, the matters that are contained in those two particular votes being aware of the facts, that since 2016 the Urban Development Corporation had been carrying these expenses without being paid by the State. I have the total of arrears owed to UDeCOTT for the period, actually 2018 to 2024, \$53,013,339. For six years, \$53 million in arrears. These are expenses that

UDeCOTT had been paying on its own, using its own revenue that it gets from the operations of the Hyatt and its car parks and so on, and it had reached a point where UDeCOTT was unable to continue to carry these expenses, so they approached us and these include maintenance of buildings and so on to cover the arrears, and that is what these allocations are, but the Member for Siparia and therefore, none of this will be spent on fete in 2025 or entertainment. Not a cent.

It is to clear off the arrears owed to UDeCOTT for the last six years. But be that as it may, I thought it was appropriate when I heard all of this to go and take a look for comparator purposes and see what kind of expenditure had been incurred under these same Votes, Official Entertainment, Expenses of the Prime Minister's Establishment, Hosting of Conferences, Seminars and Other Functions when the Member for Siparia was Prime Minister.

I have established that over the five-year period, 2010 to 2015, the total expenditure—and Prime Minister it is actually a little bit more than the number you quoted—by the Member for Siparia on these Items, entertainment, Prime Minister's establishment, Hosting of Seminars and Conferences over five years \$173,322,661—\$173,322,661, that is what the Member for Siparia spent on these items for five years. So, I went and I checked a similar five-year period for the current Prime Minister the Member for Diego Martin West and I checked the period 2015 to 2020, and when one compares the \$173 million spent by the Member for Siparia, the current Prime Minister spent \$54 million, the difference being almost \$120 million.

5.20 p.m.

So, the Member for Siparia spent \$120 million more than the Member for Diego Martin West in their respective roles as Prime Minister. But that is not all.

When the Member for Siparia came into office the expenditure of the Prime Minister's residence, official entertainment, diplomatic centres, hosting of conferences, et cetera, they had a good time in 2010, because they came in, in May. They spent \$14 million that year in all on these three things: official entertainment. Prime Minister's establishment, hosting of conferences, \$14 million. By 2012, Madam Speaker, they had increased that expenditure from \$14 million in 2010, to \$35 in 2012, \$35 million.

Mr. Young SC: "Nah man."

Hon. C. Imbert: And in 2014, they spent \$44 million, \$44 million in one year on these three items, and that is how they got up to \$173 million.

Mr. Young SC: That is Prime Minister in five years' time.

Hon. C. Imbert: \$44 million in one year, whereas our Prime Minister spent \$54 million in five years.

Mr. Young SC: \$53 million in five years.

Hon. C. Imbert: \$54/53 million. So it is just nonsense. There are arrears there is a whole list of bills that we have to repay UDeCOTT for, for the last six years. The expenditure pattern of our Prime Minister was averaging about \$10 million a year, while the expenditure pattern of their Prime Minister was three times that, \$30 to \$40 million a year. And Member for Siparia has the gall to come in here and talk about \$50 million for fete. They spend \$44 million feting in 2014.

Hon. Member: Wow.

Hon. C. Imbert: So that is that. I would not go into details about—what is it?—\$300,000 on roti and a million dollars on shrimp. I would not going into that. But that is what used to go on when the Member for Siparia was the Prime Minister.

Let me move on to the other scandalous allegation, the \$400 million. The

Member for Siparia should know better, because when she was Prime Minister the Urban Development Corporation was doing the same thing that is it is doing now. It was the Government's project management and construction company building hospitals, health centres, police stations, community centres; the same thing. Currently I asked UDeCOTT to tell me out of the \$5.1 billion or \$5.2 billion PSIP that we have for fiscal 2025, how much of that will be Urban Development Corporation spend in fiscal 2025? And, I have a list. We owe them at this point in time, for money already spent on:

- Ministry of Social Development and Family Services Head Office;
- Election and Boundaries Commission Head Office;
- Point Fortin Administrative Complex;
- Redevelopment of the Port of Spain General Hospital Central Block;
- Ministry of Sports and Community Development community centres portfolio.

I read out a whole list of community centres in the budget statement.

Ministry of Sports and Community Development sports development portfolio, because UDeCOTT does all that as well, all of the sporting facilities in Trinidad, and they also spent money in Tobago. They are currently owed TT \$318 million for work already done for the Government, and US \$13 million with respect to the redevelopment of the Central Block. That is what they are owed right now. You add up those two you are going to cross \$400 million. That alone will eat up the \$400 million that we have inside of there for them.

But in addition, between October of this year and December of this year, in terms of all these projects I have just mentioned, including refurbishment and a new project, refurbishment of the Jean Pierre Sports Complex and so on, we will

have for them another TT \$178 million/US \$19 million. Again the US dollars is for the central block, and then take it to September 2025, where in our PSIP we have an:

- Administration Complex in Arima;
- We continue the EBC Head Office;
- The Social Development and Family Services Head Office;
- The Point Fortin Administrative Complex;
- Jean Pierre Complex;
- The central block Community Centres;
- Sporting facilities; and so on.

We will have another \$308 million for them and US \$26. When you add up all of that what UDeCOTT has told me, is that they require \$1.2 billion for the projects that they undertake on behalf of the Government, for the people Trinidad and Tobago. Every police station, fire station, community centre, sporting facility, hospitals.

Mr. Hinds: Swimming pool.

Hon. C. Imbert: They do all of that—swimming pools. They do all of that. The Member for Siparia knows that and, therefore, even the allocation that we have in. I went and I added up every single allocation in every single Ministry for every single development project. When you add it all up, you come up to about \$500 million, and we have a block vote for UDeCOTT for \$400; that is \$900. They will still be out of pocket \$300 million in fiscal 2025.

This is the Government's projects manager, this is the Government's builder and they know that. They know that. They built hospitals with UDeCOTT. It is shameful the way the Member for Siparia tries to fool the people of Trinidad and

Tobago, shameful! So the \$400 million is not for the hon. Prime Minister.

Dr. Rowley: Not for Keith Rowley. Not for Mr. Rowley.

Hon. C. Imbert: I am afraid I cannot say that word Prime Minister.

Mr. Young SC: The Member for Diego Martin West.

Hon. C. Imbert: It is not for this hon. Member for Diego Martin West, our Prime Minister. That \$400 million is not for him to put in his pocket, and not to share goodies around. That is the kind of nonsense we are hearing from the ghost projects. There is PSIP with \$5.2 billion in it and UDeCOTT is implementing 20 per cent of that. Do the maths; 20 per cent of \$5 billion is a \$1 billion. Come and talk nonsense about \$400 million on ghost project. It is shameful. Well let me tell you what is also shameful. It is shameful that somebody who was Prime Minister for five years and three months does not even understand the Estimates of revenue expenditure that I have placed on this table 10 times. Ten times I have placed Estimates of expenditure and revenue on this table. Ten times.

When the hon. Member for Siparia was Prime Minister her Ministers would have put estimates of revenue and expenditure at least five times, and it is shameful that a former Prime Minister, look at what she said. Look what the hon. Member said, she went into the budget Estimates and she heard me say that revenue for 2025 is \$54 billion. But when the hon. Member try to add up all she could find was \$52 billion. So \$2 billion or \$1.6 billion missing. One set of noise and I must explain. It is shameful.

Dr. Rowley: Call a press conference.

Hon. C. Imbert: Yes, call a press conference and say it is shameful.

Mr. Young SC: After three and half hours.

Hon. C. Imbert: After all of those years in Parliament, five years as Prime

Minister, 10 years as Opposition Leader, that the Opposition Leader does not know that there are certain things that are not appropriated into the Consolidated Fund.

Mr. Hinds: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. C. Imbert: You suppose to know that! That Unemployment Levy is not appropriated, Green Fund is not appropriated, not appropriated. So we have \$1 billion dollars in Green Fund for 2025, \$600 million in Unemployment Levy. That is \$1.6 billion. Add it to the \$52 you get \$54. It is shameful that a former Prime Minister and somebody with 20 years' experience does not know that. Shameful. You know what is also shameful? That I saw something else; I could not believe it when I heard it, and I wonder who writes this rubbish for her.

Dr. Rowley: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. C. Imbert: I do not who it is, but they are crazy. Look at this one where:

“The Minister failed to mention that...the Minister plans to borrow \$12.8 billion in...2025. Therefore, the revenue in 2025 would be \$65.506 billion and that is before you add capital receipts...”

Rubbish!

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Hon. C. Imbert: Rubbish!

Hon. Member: She actually said that?

Hon. C. Imbert: Yes. Rubbish!

Dr. Rowley: Read it again. I want to hear.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Hon. C. Imbert: I so vex when I read this nonsense, you want me to read it again, Prime Minister? Okay.

Mr. Young SC: And explain.

Appropriation (Financial Year 2025)
Bill, 2024
Hon. C. Imbert (cont'd)

2024.10.10

Hon. C. Imbert: “The Minister failed to mention that...the Minister plans to borrow \$12.8 billion in...2025. Therefore, the revenue in 2025 would be \$65.506 billion and that is before you add capital receipts...”

Rubbish!

Hon. Member: Wow.

Hon. C. Imbert: Loan financing is not revenue.

Mr. Hinds: Ohhh.

Mr. Young SC: Refinancing of loan.

Hon. C. Imbert: Refinancing is not revenue.

Hone Member: Correct.

Hon. C. Imbert: This is foolishness at the highest level.

Mr. Hinds: Tell us who wrote that.

Hon. C. Imbert: Come on! They must have at least one accounting student in the UNC, at least one.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

5.20 p.m.

So, the Member for Siparia spent \$120 million more than the Member for Diego Martin West in their respect roles as Prime Minister, but that is not all. When the Member for Siparia came into office the expenditure of the Prime Minister's Residence are official entertainment, diplomatic centres, hosting of conferences, et cetera. They had a good time in 2010, because they came in, in May. They spent \$14 million that year in all, on these three things official entertainment, Prime Minister's establishment, hosting of conferences, \$14 million. By 2012, Madam Speaker, they had increase that expenditure from \$14 million in 2010, to \$35 in 2012, \$35 million.

UNREVISED

Appropriation (Financial Year 2025)
Bill, 2024
Hon. C. Imbert (cont'd)

2024.10.10

Mr. Young SC: “Nah” [*Inaudible*]

Hon. C. Imbert: And in 2014, they spent \$44 million, \$44 million in one year on these three items, and that is how they got up to \$173.

Mr. Young SC: That is Prime Minister in five years’ time.

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Dr. Rowely: Read it again. I want to hear.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Hon. C. Imbert: I so vex when I read this nonsense you want me to read it again, Prime Minister? Okay.

Mr. Young SC: And explain.

Hon. C. Imbert: The Minister fail to mention that the Minister plans to borrow \$12.8 billion in 2025, therefore, the revenue in 2025, would be \$65.5 billion and that is before you add capital receipts and—rubbish.

Hon. Member: Wow.

Hon. C. Imbert: Loan financing is not revenue.

Mr. Hinds: Ohhh.

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Mr. Young SC: Refinancing of loan.

Hon. C. Imbert: Refinancing is not revenue.

Hone Member: Correct.

Hon. C. Imbert: This is foolishness at the highest level.

Mr. Hinds: Tell us who wrote that.

Hon. C. Imbert: Come on! They must have at least one accounting student in the UNC, at least one.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

5.30 p.m.

Revenue is what you earn from taxes. That is how a government earns revenue from taxes and from sale of assets and so on, and dividends that you get from profitable state enterprises, in our case like FCB, but when you borrow money that is not revenue. What kind of madness is that? If I add what I borrow to what I earn from taxes then I will have a fiscal surplus every year, Madam Speaker. Every year I will have a fiscal surplus.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Hon. C. Imbert: Because according to the Member for Siparia my revenue for 2025 is \$65 billion and I only plan to spend \$59 so I am going to have a surplus of \$6 billion. As a matter of fact if we did this maths for the 10 years—nine years we would have been in office—we would have posted a fiscal surplus every single year, because if you add borrowing and revenue we in surplus.

Hon. Member: “UNC mathematics.”

Hon. C. Imbert: I tell you, this is what I have to deal with. Shameful! Shameful! Madam Speaker, shameful. And what beats me too, the Leader of the Opposition read out a whole list of alleged accomplishments, they do this and they do that.

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They built so many things, they gave out so many school meals, they educated so many people, et cetera, and they are so much better than the PNM at it. They are better than the PNM at everything, but, they said all of that in 2015. All these things that I have heard the Member for Siparia read out, because the Member for Siparia is talking about the period prior to their defeat in 2015. It is the same regurgitated list of achievements. They said all of that and they lost in 2015. They came back in 2020, they say it again and they lost again. Same licks, they get licks twice, and they are saying it again for a third time—

Mr. Hinds: It is licks again.

Hon. C. Imbert: It is licks again!

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: When will the Members of the Opposition understand nobody is interested. The population was not interested in 2015, they are not interested in 2020 about all these imaginary achievements of yours. They are not interested and they will not be interested in 2025, so please, through you, Madam Speaker, spare us the nonsense. Nobody is listening to that nonsense.

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. C. Imbert: “Hmph”, true. That is so true. Look at this next set of madness here that the Minister intends to borrow \$12.8 billion in 2025, and this means this Government would have borrowed \$119.8 billion in 10 years. “Stupidness. Stupidness.”

If you go into the *Review of the Economy* you will see the total public debt at, as we speak, is \$140 billion. The total public debt in 2015 was \$75 billion; 140 minus 75 is not 120. That is not even schoolboy Mathematics. The increase in debt over the last nine years is \$65 billion, is not 120. Where is this nonsense

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coming from that the Government has borrowed \$120 billion? You know what they are doing? And they do it over and over and even when they are corrected they still continue with this “stupidness”, you know.

When we go to refinance debt, so let us say we have—and we do it all the time with respect to debt taken out under the UNC, because you have 15-year, you have 20-year debt coming up for maturity. The Government has a choice, we can repay debt, so for example in 2024 in terms of repayment of debt we have repaid \$11 billion, believe it or not, in principal repayments in 2024 for \$11 billion. Reduced debt by \$11 billion, and then as that is one option, you pay it off and you use your revenues to pay it off, or you refinance. Standard. So let us say a loan that was taken out in 2013, or whatever, comes up for repayment in 2025, we have a choice, we pay it off, if we have the money we pay it off, if we “doh” have the money we refinance. But if that \$1 billion debt is refinanced, that is not net borrowing, because you are taking the money that you have to pay off the billion that was incurred in 2013. What the Member for Siparia keeps doing over and over and over, is saying, “they borrowed \$10 billion, they borrowed \$15 billion, they borrowed \$20 billion”, adding refinancing to new borrowing. Nobody does that.

Mr. Young SC: She is intentionally misleading the public.

Hon. C. Imbert: Misleading the entire public. That is why when you look at the numbers and you see the net public debt is now 140 and it was 75, it means we borrowed 65; because 65 and 75 is 140, by the way, Member for Pointe-a-Pierre. You should let your leader know 65 and 75 is 140. It means that the net increase in debt is 65 not 120. But when you keep adding refinancing and you do not take into account principal repayments, that is how you come up with this kind of

foolishness, and that was a Prime Minister, and I have to listen to that, and the “lil” children outside have to listen to that, and some of them—and university students listening to that foolishness, that loan financing is revenue. That refinancing increases the public debt. Awful. I heard the Member for—which is that one there—the one who was just ranting and raving about a statement made by—

Dr. Rowley: Couva North.

Hon. C. Imbert: Yes, Couva North. Ranting and raving about a statement made by the Prime Minister about a piece of legislation that CARICOM is currently finalizing to ban assault weapons. And the Member for Couva North quotes some character who I am told is a dealer who may very well have done very well under former authorities who had authority to give out FULs and so on, and this character is saying that “assault weapons are already banned in Trinidad and Tobago, so there is no need to ban them”!

And I heard Couva North repeat the same thing, trying to ridicule the hon. Member for Diego Martin West. But you know, when they all say this nonsense, including the so-called expert, who was in the *Guardian* newspaper, and the Member for Couva North, they do not quote the law, so let me quote the law. Let me quote the Firearms Act, Chap. 16:01. And if you go to page 9 of the Firearms Act and you go to the definition of a prohibited weapon, it means, any artillery or automatic firearm. So what is banned in Trinidad and Tobago is an automatic firearm.

But if you go to the United States, the United States passed legislation in 1994 called the Federal Assault Weapons Ban, and in that legislation which is also replicated in many of the States in the United States, what they have done is they have actually banned categories of weapons. And many of the weapons that we

see in Trinidad and Tobago, many of them that are used by gangs and murderers in Trinidad and Tobago, criminals—let us call them criminals—would fall within the definition, in the definition of an assault weapon in the US Assault Weapons Ban legislation of 1994, and they are not automatic weapons, and therein is the difference. And if anybody has any interest in this, instead of listening to somebody with a vested interest, a dealer in firearms, a man who sells guns and makes money out of selling guns, instead of listening to him, or listening to somebody who traffics in things, [*Laughter*] if one went and checked, this is the definition of assault weapons in the United States, and this is what it says, “all of the following specified semiautomatic rifles, all AK series, Uzi, Beretta, Colt AR-15 series”, and it is just—I do not know what it is. What is the obsession of the Member for Siparia with weapons? What is the obsession?

Hon. Member: Votes.

Hon. C. Imbert: What is the obsession of the UNC with guns?

Dr. Rowley: Pandering to a particular dealer.

Hon. C. Imbert: I mean, come on. I read another article here, and I will refer it to hon Members, I mean, there are not too many of them over there, but this is a *Time* magazine article, very current, May 2023, and you know what it is entitled?

“How the AR-15 Rifle Became America’s Most Dangerous Weapon.”

And what this is all about, is indicating when you do the analysis, all of the mass shootings where people go into a cinema and kill 50 people, or go into a school and start to shoot little children and so on, done by an AR-15 semiautomatic rifle.

5.40 p.m.

So, I feel they must have somebody in the UNC who has sense, because our legislation is very narrow and it simply says, automatic weapons are banned. But

the AR-15 is not an automatic weapon, it is a semi-automatic rifle. And that is what CARICOM is doing. CARICOM is not foolish, the United States, the Federal Government is not foolish, the State of California is not foolish. They recognized that these semi-automatic rifles, like the AR-15, are murderous and must be banned and should not be in the hands of a civilian. Why would a civilian want to have a—what are you doing with an AR-15? What is the point to that? “Yuh going somewhere in de forest to shoot deer and tattoo and ting with a semi-automatic AR to do”—[*Member makes sound*]

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Hon. C. Imbert: Nonsense! And it is time for Members opposite to stop talking nonsense just because a firearm’s dealer with some vested interest in selling guns said, “Assault weapons already banned in Trinidad.” Just “doh” buy that foolishness; “doh” buy that foolishness. So you must ban—give me an example. An AK-47 is an automatic?

Mr. Young SC: Yeah.

Hon. C. Imbert: You must ban AK—

Mr. Young SC: Semi-automatic and automatic.

Hon. C. Imbert: That is semi-automatic too?

Mr. Young SC: Both.

Hon. C. Imbert: So, let everybody have an AR-15. That is what the Member of Siparia is saying. Let everybody have an AR-15. “Roll up yuh”—

Mr. Young SC: “Empty yuh clip”.

Hon. C. Imbert: “Empty yuh clip” in your AR-15, stand your ground.

Hon. Member: And bring peace and order.

Hon. C. Imbert: And you know what is the hard part about that stand your ground thing? Who is the fella? Is it Trayvon Martin? That is his name?

Hon. Member: Yeah.

Hon. C. Imbert: I mean, why are you using that terminology? Stand your ground has such distasteful terminology.

Mr. Young SC: It is racist.

Hon. C. Imbert: It is racist. Why? Who writes the speeches for the Member for Siparia?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: Who writes this rubbish? Now—how much more time do I have, Madam Speaker?

Madam Speaker: Your ordinary time ends at 5.58.23 p.m., and then you have an extended 10 minutes, if you so wish, which will carry you to 6.08 p.m.

Hon. C. Imbert: Okay.

Madam Speaker: So are you—

Hon. C. Imbert: I am taking everything, but how much time in total do I ask?

Madam Speaker: So you will end at 6.08.23 p.m., eight minutes past six.

Hon. C. Imbert: Twenty-something minutes. Thank you very much.

Now, the other thing that disappointed me, to no end, is—and all the Members opposite continued with this nonsense. After making all sorts of misinterpretations, false statements, untruths, foolishness, scandalous nonsense, for about 10 minutes—that is how the Leader of the Opposition’s response started off, 10 minutes, a barrage of foolishness. As I told you, “cyah even do basic maths, cyah add, doh know that borrowing is not revenue”. After all of that, what did we hear after that? I think the Opposition Leader spoke for about three hours and 20

minutes—something so, I cannot remember how long it was, but it was something so. You are talking about three hours and 10 minutes of utter foolishness.

This budget statement and this 2025 budget has at the back of it a series of fiscal measures; a series of them. And I want to read them into the record, and I will start with the smaller ones first. An Online Numeracy Programme for Adults, badly needed, because clearly, adults inside of here “cyah” count; online numeracy, “dey cyah” count. This programme is definitely needed in Trinidad and Tobago.

Dr. Rowley: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. C. Imbert: [*Laughter*] A National Digital Literacy Project: That is very important, especially for elderly people who did not grow up in a digital age. We have to assist them to become literate, digitally.

Then, Digital Literacy Certification for Students. Again, there will be some students who may not have access to devices, may not have access to the environment, in terms of becoming digitally literate, that is for them.

Solar Powered Sustainability Project in Secondary Schools: Teaching our young people, encouraging them to get involved in dealing with green energy, sustainability, climate change, renewables. That is there, Solar Powered Sustainability Project in Secondary Schools.

Agriculture internship; CSEC remedial mathematics, they definitely need that over there. And then, Minimum Wages of Government Workers, where we are—we have made a very clear statement that for those workers on the Government payroll who are receiving \$20.50 an hour, from November, we are going to increase that to \$22.50. And it is about 20,000 at least, because I mentioned MTS, URP and CEPEP, but also I am told reforestation workers may be

in that category as well, and there may be others. So you are talking at least 20,000 workers.

And then, Public Sector Wage Negotiations. The UNC got all of their—I do not know what to call them, associates, acolytes, activists, fifth columnists, whoever “dey does” associate with outside there, to deliberately misinterpret the statements in the budget. And I want to read into the record what my statements are, that:

“...I have today instructed the Chief Personnel Officer to make the necessary preparations to commence negotiations with those trade unions who accepted the previous 4 percent...”

And we have:

“...decided to offer workers an increase of 5 per cent.”

Where in those words does it say that the Minister negotiating? Where does it say, “Take it or leave it”? It says that the Minister of Finance, who is authorized under the law to do this, by the way, has instructed the CPO to commence negotiation, and this is the offer we are putting on the table.

I even had to talk to a serious trade union leader about this because I saw all these statements on the newspapers, and I called a senior trade union leader and I said, “What are you talking about?”

Mr. Indarsingh: Roget?

Hon. C. Imbert: “Nah”, I would never do that. I said a senior and serious.

Mr. Young SC: Not senile.

Hon. C. Imbert: Senior and serious; senior and serious trade union leader. And I had to talk to the person and say, “What are you talking about? What is all this thing I am seeing in the papers about how the Government is taking over the

collective bargaining process and that is a final offer?” I said, “Where yuh get that from?” The person said, “Well, that is the impression I get.” I said, “Impression?” I said, “Leh meh read meh ting for yuh.” “Oh hor, but that is the impression I get,” from them, from the UNC. And you see, that is the danger of propaganda. That is the danger of propaganda.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: You see, if you tell an untruth long enough and often enough, some people will believe it, and that is the strategy of the Opposition. That is the strategy of the Opposition. I cannot use the word from the saying about—“yuh doh really say yuh telling an untruth”, you would say—I have to use another word, but that is their strategy. If you tell untruths loud enough and long enough and repeat it enough, some people will believe your untruths.

Dr. Rowley: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. C. Imbert: I wish I could say that.

I went on to say, Madam Speaker, that the Government, the Cabinet has approved, agreed to give a \$1,000 book grant to needy students in 2025. The Government also agreed to a tax amnesty and a national insurance amnesty. The Government also agreed to a Housing and Village Improvement Programme, increased for contractors up to \$200,000 per unit.

We also agreed to waive all taxes and duties on sporting equipment to encourage healthy lifestyles. We made a commitment, the Ministry of Finance will sit down with the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries over the next couple of months and clean out every lacuna, every loophole, every ambiguity, everything in our tax laws that deals with agriculture, so that come first quarter next year, we will make agriculture totally tax free.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: Also, to encourage people to use electric vehicles, we are exempting electric vehicle charging equipment from all taxes. Also, to deal with another issue, we are going to raise \$3 billion in VAT bonds.

Now, the reason why I said all of this, \$3 billion in VAT bonds; no duty on electric charging equipment; tax free in agriculture; no taxes on sporting equipment; increase in the amount paid to contractors for the Housing and Village Improvement Programme; tax amnesty, national insurance amnesty; \$1,000 book grant; 5 per cent offer to public servants; increase in \$2 per hour, which will put at least \$500 in the pockets of security guards.

5.50 p.m.

Madam Speaker, \$500 a month tax free, minimum wages of Government workers, and all these other remedial programmes, remedial arithmetic, remedial mathematics, digital literacy, solar power sustainability, online numeracy. Not one word about all of those measures, Madam Speaker. Not one word. For three hours all I had to hear was how great the UNC was when they were in office, and how great they will be again when they are back in office. I had to hear that diatribe for three hours, but this is a budget. It has fiscal measures in it.

Madam Speaker: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. C. Imbert: No, I am not displaying. I am just waving.

Madam Speaker: No, you flagged.

Hon. C. Imbert: All right. I am waving. Not a word about the fiscal measures. You know why? They “cyah” argue against the book grant.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: They “cyah” argue about making agriculture a tax-free industry.

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Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: They “cyah” argue about exemption from taxes for sporting equipment and for electric chargers.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: They “cyah” argue against an extra \$2 an hour, an extra \$500 a month—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert:—for MTS security guards. They “cyah” argue against that. They cannot argue against a tax amnesty.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: They cannot argue against \$3 billion in VAT bonds. They “cyah” argue about anything inside this budget. Nothing!

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: And that is why we had to get that diatribe of nonsense, that stream, that constant stream of irrelevancy. You know another thing I want to say, it is traditional every year, I have noticed it begin to creep in as a trend. The Opposition uses what I call “go-to commentators” in the media to say what they want to say, and these people, of course, pretend to be neutral.

So we have former UNC Members of Parliament pretending to be neutral. We have former candidates in election in Tobago pretending to be neutral. We have deputy political leaders of parties in Opposition to the PNM pretending to be neutral. So you have all these UNC Opposition elements outside there and the UNC uses them to make commentary in the media, and for a whole two weeks before the budget, doom and gloom, the country gone through, the Minister of Finance will not be able to present a good budget, brace for pain, gas price going

up, they are going and cut back here, they are going to cut back there.

In fact, Madam Speaker, one of the media houses even had the title of their post-budget presentation, “Ease or Squeeze”, to tell how they were. And you know what is beating all of them, the UNC and the “go-to commentators” in the media? It was a good budget.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: It was a good budget and that is what is hurting them. It “huttin” them—

Hon. Members: In their craw.

Hon. C. Imbert:—“in dey craw”.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Hon. C. Imbert: It “huttin” them we did not increase any prices, we did not increase any taxes, but instead we reduced taxes on sporting equipment.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: We reduced taxes on electric charging equipment. We are going to eliminate all taxes in the agriculture sector. You know what “hut dem” as well? The fact that we have had three consecutive years of economic growth under this Government, that “huttin” them as well.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. Rowley: Down to “dey” toe.

Hon. C. Imbert: “Yes, huttin dem down to dey toe”. You see, they were not looking for that at all. And let me deal with a piece of mischief outside there.

We have been battling with various elements with respect to the modernization of revenue collection in this country for two years. Battling for two years because there are people in this country who do not want the Government to

know that they are collecting millions and millions of dollars every year and somehow avoiding tax. So we have been battling for the introduction of a modern semi-autonomous revenue authority like over 60 countries in the world have already done—Guyana has done it for example. Barbados has done it—and they are fighting us and we are fighting all through the court.

So we get into the court and we have to say why we want to do this. It is not just a situation of whether we believe that the legislation is within the confines of the Constitution or not. We also have to tell the court why we want to introduce a revenue authority. So I go on affidavit, I explained our financial situation. I explained that if we are not allowed to modernize revenue collection in this country—

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. C. Imbert: No—there is a tax gap estimated at somewhere between \$5 billion and \$10 billion a year from tax evaders outside there. Experts have come up with that number. That is not my number. I remember I brought an expert from the IMF years ago just to look at Value Added Tax—an expert—and using the gross sales, and the GDP, and other indicators, this expert determined that we lose \$5 billion in Value Added Tax alone in Trinidad and Tobago every year, and of that \$5 billion, \$2.5 billion is based on Government policy. It is based on exemptions. So basic foods are exempt and so on.

So take out that \$2.5 billion because that is Government policy. We have deliberately decided not to subject basic foods and so on, to Value Added Tax. But that leaves another \$2.5 billion. So just on Value Added Tax alone there is \$2.5 billion in tax evasion. That is just one form of tax. They have other forms. You have petroleum profit tax, you have corporation tax, you have income tax, you

have customs duty, and that is why the experts have estimated the tax gap due to tax evasion could be as much as \$10 billion a year.

So I go on affidavit and I say, “One of the ways we want to deal with this is through this modern semi-autonomous revenue authority like so many other countries in the world.” And I say, “If we are prevented from doing that things are not going to be easy for us.” The exact words I used are: “Unless we can proceed with the revenue authority and we are prevented from doing that and we have to revert to additional methods, things will be a little difficult in this country for the next two years.” That is what I say, “unless”. But we won the case, Madam Speaker. The Government won the case.

So therefore, the premise of the affidavit has been fulfilled. It is unless we can get through with the revenue authority, we are going to have financial problems, but we got through, Madam Speaker. And it is a question of literacy.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: It is a question of literacy. Somebody reading an affidavit with that big word in it, “unless” we get through with the revenue authority things will be difficult. Like they “cyah” see the word “unless”? They wipe it out and they say Imbert say, sorry, the Minister of Finance, say tough times coming for the next two years. Well, they “ain’t” coming because we get through with the Revenue Authority, Madam Speaker. It “ain’t” coming through.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: And if we could even get \$1 billion a year—if you look at the strategic plan of revenue authority, they estimate that within three to five years we will have an additional collection of at least \$5 billion because they are going to deal with that tax evasion.

Let me say something, let me repeat something. The scaremongers, the naysayers, they say, “Oh, they going after people who sell bottle water at the side of the road, nuts vendor, doubles.” Nonsense. There are people in this country earning millions of dollars—eh Member for Fyzabad?

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. C. Imbert: Well I do not know if that is tax—who do not declare income and do not pay tax. They only take cash. And you know that is why there is this opposition from the Member for Siparia for cash. That is why the Member for Siparia against cash you know. Repeatedly opposed to cash—sorry, bitterly opposed to cashless. Let me repeat, the reason why the Member for Siparia is opposed to cashless transactions is that the Member wants to deal in cash because cash is not traceable. There is no record. So if you collect cash and you spend cash, there is no record.

6.00 p.m.

But if you collect your money electronically, it has to be sent to a bank account, and then to make a payment electronically. A There is a record. There is a record and that is why the Member for Siparia is so against cashless transactions because cash is invisible and cannot be traced.

Mr. Hinds: “Dem old hundred dollar bills dey have hiding.”

Hon. C. Imbert: Yes, those hundred dollar bills—the amount of people they promised and if and when they come back into Government they will—

Mr. Hinds: Repealing the law.

Hon. C. Imbert:—repeal the law and allow all dem— m\$500 million in old bills in some vault somewhere underneath somebody’s house with camphor balls I am told.

Mr. Hinds: Yeah, yeah.

Hon. C. Imbert: That is what they are saying. That is why the Member for Siparia is opposed to cashless, because she is aware that there are large volumes of cash in a vault underneath somebody's house.

While I am on that, the nonsense I have to read in the papers every day. I read an editorial today about this issue with the Hyatt. Now let me state for the record, what the Hyatt did was foolishness, and it is a good thing that the Hyatt rescinded that foolish decision to tell citizens of this country that they are no longer accepting Trinidad and Tobago dollars. Foolishness. It is a good thing they moved fast and they got rid of it.

Dr. Rowley: You did not instruct him?

Hon. C. Imbert: Pardon?

Dr. Rowley: You did not instruct him?

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Hon. C. Imbert: But, I hear the line Minister for the Hyatt harassing him, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Hon. C. Imbert: Madam Speaker, he instructed him, but the whole point is, I saw an editorial today that that foolishness that the Hyatt did will prevent the Government of Trinidad and Tobago from moving ahead with its cashless agenda.

Dr. Rowley: "Chupidness"

Hon. C. Imbert: Nonsense. Who writes these things? One hotel does nonsense and that will stop us from proceeding where 1.4 billion people in India using cashless. In India eh, 1.4 billion people in China using cashless, 1.4 billion people in Africa using cashless, 800 million people in Europe using cashless. That is over

5 billion I counted there.

Mr. Young SC: That is crime measure.

Hon. C. Imbert: Madam Speaker, five billion people in the world using cashless and we in little Trinidad and Tobago we must stay behind the rest of the world.

Madam Speaker, I had an experience—how much time I have? Let me hear.

Mr. Young SC: Six more minutes.

Madam Speaker: You have until eight minutes past six.

Mr. Young SC: About five.

Hon. C. Imbert: I had an experience. Let me give you this experience. I was on my way back to Trinidad and Tobago. I had taken a little vacation; thank God I got it.

Mr. Young SC: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Young SC: Yes, I got a vacation and I was in Madrid airport. I went to the counter to check in my bag and in front of me was a Chinese gentleman—a real Chinese by the way. [*Laughs*]. “He from Beijing or something and he had ah large carry-on bag and he went to the counter and the lady behind the counter tells him there is ah extra charge for that. So he start to argue and he said well no. She said look at de website, Sir. There is an extra charge for dat. 50 Euros for dat. So he pulls out ah 50 Euro note. She say no cash. No cash. So de fella almost broke down in tears. What am I to do? No cash, no cash.”

Mr. Indarsingh: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Young SC: No, that is not the point of the story. “So he looks around and I behind him. Ah say look, it’s all right and I took my credit card and I tap de thing because I used the tapping feature, ah pay the 50 Euros for de man, I took his 50 Euro bill and I went my way. He happy like pappy.” But if—he did not have a

credit card you see—and if I was not there, I do not know what that fella would have done and this is a very common occurrence. I am told that most airline counters all over the world now are refusing to accept cash. Yesterday the Prime Minister told about a similar experience that he had.

Mr. Young SC: “Yuh know he doh like card.”

Hon. C. Imbert: So I do not know what the Member for Siparia will do if she in Madrid airport and she does not pay for the 10 or 20 bags that she has and the person at the counter says you have to pay for that.

Mr. Young SC: [*Inaudible*] will pay.

Dr. Rowley: She is a [*Inaudible*]. She lost \$20,000 in Paris you know.

Hon. C. Imbert: True.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Hon. C. Imbert: So we are proceeding with our cashless agenda. We are not going to allow people who have sinister agendas to stop us from continuing to modernize Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: But you know—

Mr. Hinds: UNC or no UNC.

Hon. C. Imbert:—Madam Speaker, people complained that I spoke too long. But as the Prime Minister pointed out, this is most likely the last opportunity to deliver a budget statement in this session or this Parliament. If you do the maths it might be very difficult to have another budget before the next general election because the general election is in August. Therefore, it would have been irresponsible of this Government, and irresponsible of this Finance Minister not to take this time to report all of the things that we have done.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: Because the other side has a habit of saying we have done nothing. We have done nothing. So I took five hours and I told the population exactly what we have done.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: All of the things that we have done and the joke about it—

Dr. Rowley: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. C. Imbert: Exactly. As the Prime Minister said, the oppositionists, the naysayers, the critics, they do not like story. “De story too nice. De PNM do too much. So de Minister mustn’t say all de nice good things that de PNM do. Mustn’t talk about all de good things that de PNM do. Mustn’t say that de economy is growing. Mustn’t say that we have managed a very difficult financial situation for the last 10 years.”

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: I am proud, and with the permission of the Prime Minister, I am proud of every Minister that I have had to work with of this Cabinet. I am so proud of what we have been able to do over the last nine years.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: As far as I am concerned, we have done a fantastic job, fantastic, under very, very difficult circumstances where oil prices dropped to zero. We have done an excellent job, Madam Speaker. So therefore, I commend to this House the fiscal measures that I have spoken about. I commend to this House the Government Trinidad and Tobago led by the Prime Minister—I cannot call his name—the Member for Diego Martin West.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Appropriation (Financial Year 2025)
Bill, 2024
Hon. C. Imbert (cont'd)

2024.10.10

Hon. C. Imbert: I commend that to this House and I am certain Madam Speaker, that in 2025 we will be here and they will be there. I beg to move.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping and laughter*]

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a second time.

Hon. C. Imbert: Madam Speaker, in accordance with Standing Order 81(8), I beg to move:

That the Appropriation (Financial Year 2025) Bill, 2024, be referred to the Standing Finance Committee for the consideration of the Bill together with the Estimates.

Madam Speaker: This House shall now go into Standing Finance Committee to consider the Bill and the Estimates.

House resolved itself into Standing Finance Committee.

6.10 p.m.

Madam Chairman: Hon. Members, in accordance with Standing Orders 81(2) and (8), the Estimates containing the details of the financial requirements along with the Appropriation Bill have been referred to this Committee for consideration. The documents before the Committee therefore include: the *Draft Estimates Details of Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure for the Financial Year 2025*, which identifies:

1. The Heads of Expenditure;
2. The chart of accounts for expenditure;
3. The classification of expenditure Sub-Items under the Personnel Expenditure, Goods and Services and Minor Equipment Purchases Sub-Heads;

4. The summary of the total allocation to each Head of Expenditure;
5. The Sub-Item details relevant to each Head of Expenditure for the current fiscal year and the two fiscal years immediately preceding.

The *Draft Estimates of the Revenue and Expenditure of the Statutory Boards and Similar Bodies and of the Tobago House of Assembly for the Financial Year 2025* which identifies:

1. The statutory board or body for each Head of Expenditure;
2. The abstract of estimated revenue and expenditure for the year ending 30th of September, 2025;
3. The abstract showing the Government's subvention for 2023 Actual Expenditure, 2024 Estimates, 2024 Revised Estimates, 2025 Estimates and the increase or decrease of the 2025 Estimates over or under the 2024 Revised Estimates;
4. The chart of accounts for income and expenditure;
5. The classification of expenditure Sub-Items under the Personnel Expenditure, Goods and Services and Minor Equipment Purchases, Sub-Heads;
6. The Sub-Item details relevant to each statutory board or body for the current fiscal year and the two fiscal years immediately preceding.

The *Draft Estimates of Development Programme for the Financial Year 2025*, which includes:

1. The summary of estimates of the Development Programme for the financial year 2025 for Part A, the Consolidated Fund;
2. The summary of the total allocation to each Head of Expenditure for Sub-Head 09, Development Programme Consolidated Fund;

3. The Item, Sub-Item, Project Group and Project Description details relevant to each Head of Expenditure for the current fiscal year and the two fiscal years immediately preceding;
4. The summary of estimates of Part B, the Infrastructure Development Fund for the financial year 2025;
5. The summary of the total allocation to each Head of Expenditure for Head 701, Infrastructure Development Fund;
6. The Item, Sub-Item, Project Group and Project Description details relevant to each Head of Expenditure, for the current fiscal year and the two fiscal years immediately preceding.

The Appropriation (Financial Year 2025) Bill, 2024: The Bill provides for the service of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial year ending on the 30th day of September, 2025. The Bill seeks to authorize the sum of \$49,097,035,525 from the Consolidated Fund. The Schedule details the sum to be approved for each Head of Expenditure.

In accordance with Standing Order 85(1), the consideration of the clauses of the Bill will be postponed until after the consideration of the Schedule, which lists the Heads of Expenditure to be approved. The Heads will be considered in the order submitted by the Leader of the Opposition and I believe the list has been circulated.

So the proposed work schedule is as follows: Hon. Members, there are 41 Heads of Expenditure to be considered over a five-day period. Therefore, I wish to propose that the Committee meets each day from 10.00 a.m. to 8.00 p.m. or for so long thereafter to consider a minimum of eight Heads of Expenditure per day.

Further, consideration of the Tobago House of Assembly, hon. Members, I

crave your indulgence to have the Committee agree on the time for the examination of the Tobago House of Assembly and the Central Administrative Services Tobago on day four, which is Wednesday, October 16, 2024, in order to allow these representatives to make arrangements to travel to Trinidad. May I suggest that given the order submitted by the Leader of the Opposition, the Tobago House of Assembly and Central Administrative Services Tobago be examined on the said day four, Wednesday, October 16, 2024 at 10.00 a.m. and 1.00 p.m. respectively? I guess that is agreeable.

I am also to remind the speaking time. Hon. Members, in accordance with Standing Order 45(1), the speaking time in the Standing Finance Committee shall not exceed five minutes on each intervention. Each Minister will be invited to make a brief five-minute opening statement on the Ministry or departments' priority areas for the upcoming year.

Procedure for each Head: Hon. Members, the procedure for each Head of Expenditure shall be as follows:

1. The Head and the amount to be appropriated will be announced by the Chairman.
2. The Minister will then be invited to make a brief opening statement.
3. The Chairman will then propose the question that the sum proposed stand part of the Schedule.
4. For each Head of Expenditure, the Chairman will call the Sub-Head followed by the Item. The Sub-Items will not be called. Discussions can ensue on the Item called or the relevant Sub-Item and clarification sought. Once the Committee moves to another Sub-Head, questions from a previous Sub-Head will not be entertained.

5. The Chairman will repeat the procedure for the Development Programme.
6. Once this is concluded, the Chairman will then put the question that the sum stand part of the Schedule.
7. The procedure will be repeated for each Head of Expenditure.

Other Business. And I therefore invite Members of the Committee if they wish to raise any matter under Other Business, and seeing there is none, I therefore, hon Members, the meeting for the Standing Finance Committee is suspended and will resume on Friday, October 11, 2024, that is tomorrow, at 10.00 a.m. Thank you. Safe journey.

6.18 p.m.: *Committee suspended.*